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HARILEK

H A R I L E K

A Romance

BY

“GANPAT”



GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

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TO
ARYENIS
SOMETIMES DELICIOUSLY
SAPIENTISSIMA
SOMETIMES ADORABLY
BABETTE

THE
STORY-TELLER'S INVITATION

I'LL tell you a tale of a far-off land,
Cliff-girt o'er the yellow desert sand,
 And crowned with peaks of snow;
Of forests of pine and a garden gay,
Of shirts of mail in a steel-capped fray,
 And shafts from the six-foot bow.

Of soldier-men and of maidens fair —
Of a fairy princess with red-gold hair
 In a stronghold of wizards cruel;
Of a fight or two of an old-world kind —
Magazine-rifle and spear combined,
 And death in a hand-locked duel.

Of men and women like me and you,
Of love old-fashioned yet ever new,
 Brave eyes in a valley of fear;
Of the cold grey steel and the long warm kiss,
With a proper ending of honeymoon bliss —
 Won't you gather round me and hear?

“GANPAT”

FOREWORD

IN giving this story to the world I must frankly confess that I do not know whether it is a remarkable record of actual adventure, or a fantastic romance from the pen of some one gifted with a particularly vivid imagination.

Harry Lake and I last parted in 1920 near Sorarogha in Waziristan, on the Indian frontier — I bound for home on leave, he in charge of the picketing troops, whose business it was to ensure the reasonably safe passage of wearied soldiery like me through the knife-edged hills, where the Mahsud snipers made night noisy and day sometimes dangerous.

I have known him on and off for many years. Stationed together before the war, our paths led apart in 1914 — he to France with his regiment, I to East Africa with mine — to meet again in a London hospital in late 1915. With him once more in India in 1917, I then lost sight of him for over two years, till January, 1920, brought us together in a rather noisy brawl in Mahsud Waziristan, where the tribesmen were taking exception to our military promenade up their pet valley.

I know his people slightly, more particularly his sister, Ethel Wheeler, to whom he refers in his story, but she does not often favour me with letters. It was somewhat of a surprise, therefore, when in October last year, while a student at the Staff College, Quetta, an English mail brought me a bulky parcel and a letter from her, enclosing one from Lake, in which was the following passage:

I don't know if you are still doing anything in the author line, but if you are you might amuse yourself editing this record which I have made up from my diary. You are always keen on out-of-the-way places, and in sending this off, on the very shadowy chance of it ever reaching home, it occurred to me that you might like to see it, so I am telling Ethel to pass it on to you. If you care to get it published, you

are welcome, the more so since I think the world could do with such a record of simple adventure as an antidote to the kind of stuff appearing when I left civilization.

I opened the parcel that night and dipped into the stained pages. There was a good deal of work on hand, but I'm afraid it got left over, for it was past four in the morning before I turned the last pages with a rather dazed brain, but a firm determination to edit the story. The kind assistance of Miss Douie — sister of a fellow-student — enabled me to get it typed in the little spare time snatched — mostly very late at night — from a strenuous course of instruction; while the local knowledge of Central Asia of Major Blacker — another fellow-student — was of the greatest help in following Lake's rather hieroglyphic record of his journey to Sakae-land.

Whether red-gold-haired Aryenis and her grave-eyed father, stalwart Henga and his Sake bowmen, Philos and his pretty wife and blue-eyed baby, crippled Paulos, the fiendish Shamans and the murderous brown Sakae are real living people, I cannot pretend to say, any more than I can tell whether pine-fringed Aornos, the snow-peaks of Saghar Mor, or the gloomy Shaman citadel, with its red-hot trapdoor, exist outside Lake's brain. All I can say is that he has never told me anything but the truth all the years I have known him. Payindah I remember well, while Wrexham I met several times in 1917, and both are very accurately described.

If the story is true, then I cannot say how the letters and the manuscript reached us, save that, from the vernacular inscriptions on the original wrapping which Ethel Wheeler sent me, it has clearly been passed from hand to hand by Indian merchants on the Chinese trade route. Perhaps Lake and his friends found the missing camels, and built up a sufficient store of water at stages across the desert to enable one or two determined men to make a flying journey out and back to hand over their letters to some Indian trader. But he has given no details as to how he proposed to get their letters home.

If Lake's record is genuine, then I envy him intensely, and hope that it will be many, many years before any explorer, even of the type of genial Sir Aurel Stein, penetrates to Sakaeland, for it and its people seem to me far too pleasing for one to wish them spoilt by the contact of twentieth-century civilization.

If, on the other hand, it is merely an invention of Lake's to while away monotonous evenings during his explorations in unknown Central Asia, where he certainly is, then I hope that his readers will find it as interesting and realistic as I and others here have done.

“GANPAT”

STAFF COLLEGE
QUETTA, BALUCHISTAN
1st January, 1923

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HARILEK

HARILEK



CHAPTER I

I MEET WREXHAM AND FORSYTH

MOST of the big things in life hinge on very small beginnings. I wonder if the people who pose as pure materialists ever reflect on that fact when they hold forth on their complete and absolute certainty that there is no guiding hand in men's affairs or in the conception, creation, and control of that most wonderfully intricate piece of machinery, the universe.

Missing a train, accepting an invitation, having a dance cut, all may prove the turning-point in a life if you take the trouble to trace things back to their beginnings.

Take my own case, as I sit writing here with a glimpse of the twin snow-peaks of Saghar Mor through my open window, rose-red in the last light of the setting sun, above a level haze of lilac. Here am I with all I ever sought of life, all and far more. And yet, but for a chance visit to the Karachi Gymkhana Club some two years ago, I should probably to-day be smoking a pipe in my old Sussex manor farmhouse, after a day in the stubble, leading a quiet uneventful life, content — in a way — but having savoured only a fraction of what life really holds.

A gymkhana club bar does not sound the ideal starting-point for a life's romance, for a complete change in all that life may mean, and yet it so happened to me, as doubtless it has happened before and may happen again to others.

I've been thinking for some time of writing down the events of the last two years, partly because they sometimes seem so unreal that the only way to bring home their con-

creteness — if I may coin a word — is to put them down in cold, hard black-and-white, partly because I think they may serve to show others that romance is not yet dead, and that adventure is still to be found for those who will but pluck up heart and seek.

What is that passage of Kipling's about Truth being an undressed lady at the bottom of a well, and that if you meet her — well, as a gentleman there are only two things to do, one to look away, the other to give her a print dress? So I, being, I hope, a gentleman, choose the latter.

To begin at the very beginning, I must revert to the bar at the gymkhana club which I have mentioned, and, before beginning my tale, I suppose I had better introduce myself as I was when the story started, late in 1920.

My name is Lake, and Harry Lake is what most people call me. My father — God rest his soul — was the owner of a small place in Sussex, which he used to farm and shoot in the intervals of travelling, and which he expected me to take over when he died.

But farming — even with a certain backing of cash — did not appeal to me, and I drifted into the army. Then, much to the annoyance of my father, who wanted me to soldier at home since I would go into the service, I transferred to an Indian regiment. Travel always appealed to me, especially in the less well-known parts of the globe, and India seemed a convenient kicking-off place. One got long leave, which the army at home does not legislate for; and blessed with a little money, I was able to indulge my hobby to the full.

Central Asia became my playground, and, whenever I could get leave, I sped up to Kashmir and thence up one or other of the valleys into the great sleepy spaces that lie behind, the desiccated bone-dry spaces of Ladakh, or among the snow-clad mountains that fringe the north of Lalla Rookh's country.

Then came the war, and, after frantic panics that I was going to be out of it all, tearful wires to pals at Simla, de-

spairing appeals to every general I had ever met, I found myself in France, and entered upon a series of panics for fear I shouldn't get away again.

After longer or shorter periods of mud, boredom, and fright, with a spell of hospital inserted, my regiment went on to that benighted back front, East Africa, a spot for which I conceived the most intense loathing, and was glad to find myself back once more in India in late 1917. A spell of dépôt work, and off again to Palestine and later to Cyprus, where, though life was uneventful, I amused myself brushing up the Greek I had learnt travelling during the holidays with my father. I am pretty good at languages, and had kept up my Greek, so that by the time I left Cyprus I spoke it as fluently as ever again.

In 1919 my father's death led me home to settle up the estate, and then out again, with the firm intention of leaving the army within the year.

A bout of frontier scrapping in the 1920 Waziristan show was my last effort, and then I really made up my mind to go straightaway. I was blessed with ample independent means — ample enough for me anyway; most of my regimental pals were dead, and so in 1920 I sent in my papers.

I had shot most things to be found about Northern India, but had never secured a tiger, and so made up my mind for a visit to the Central Provinces before going home. I wandered down to Karachi *en route* south to spend a few days there, and that's where this story really begins.

The first night there I did what one always does in the East — I went down to the club bar to pass the time of day with any old acquaintances that might be there. I had known Karachi fair to middling well in the old pre-war days, and I thought I was pretty sure to find friends, but, as a matter of fact, the club was rather deserted.

So I lit a cheroot and sat down, feeling rather lonesome, as one does in a place where one has spent many cheery evenings with a crowd of good fellows, most of whom have gone west. I was thinking about going across to the Sind Club

when a man entered the bar. I looked twice to make quite sure, and then walked over to him.

"Long time since we shared a flask in the Jordan Valley, John," said I, tapping him on the shoulder.

He spun round.

"Hulloa, Harry! D——d glad to see you, old bird! What on earth are you doing here? I saw your push only last week, and they said you'd chucked it and gone home. Family acres and all that sort of thing."

"First part's true; for the rest, you see me here, large as life, very much at a loose end, and contemplating trying for a tiger in the C.P. before I go home. They tell me England hasn't quite recovered from the war yet, and when it isn't coal-striking it's doing something equally unpleasant, so I thought I'd give it a miss for a few months."

"Funny thing running into you here; I was just writing to your home address. I've been up on a globe trot Kashgar way. I'm demobbed now, too. Good thing to be one's own master once more."

Being on his own was a thing that would appeal to John Wrexham, independent by nature. An engineer by trade, swept up in the vortex of the war as an Indian Army reserve officer, I first met him in a particularly offensive trench Givenchy way. I met him frequently after that, always cheery, always busy, beloved of every battalion commander, to whose needs he ministered in the capacity of subaltern of a sapper-and-miner field company.

A brave soul, too, John, of the most heroic, despite his inclination to stoutness. He amassed some very pretty ribbons before the war was out, and a reputation among those who knew him worth more than all the ribbons in the world.

Later I picked him up again in Palestine, commanding a field company this time, in the most professional manner. I remember well our first encounter in Palestine, where I ran into him superintending a working party under close fire. It was such a typical picture of John. Sucking a pipe, method-

ical, cheerful, and utterly devoid of fear, his helmet on one side of his rather bullet head, his shrewd grey eyes taking in everything, quick and caustic comments for those who weren't putting their backs into it, a woman's touch and a woman's kindly word for any one who had "taken it," red knees over blue puttees, ruddy face with the chin puckered over a long white gash picked up in an argument with a Hun near Festubert — very much a man all over is John Wrexham.

"What were you writing about, John? It's not like you."

John's inability to put pen to paper except under direct necessity was as well known as his practical efficiency at every point of his trade, or as his personal courage. In Palestine he was the despair of his C.R.E., a ponderous soul, and a lover of paper.

"Wanted to find out what you were doing. I've got a stunt on, and I want company. I've got one fellow coming along, but I want another, and I thought you might be at a loose end. Come under the fan and I'll show you something."

When we had installed ourselves under the electric fan in two armchairs, he pulled out his pipe, filled it methodically, lit it, and then proceeded. One never hurries John when he has something to say. It's always worth waiting for.

"Did you ever trek into Kashgar, Harry?" he asked at last.

"No, I never got as far as that. Why?"

"I was up that way last year, and found one or two things rather interesting."

"What were you doing? I didn't know you were keen on Central Asia."

"I am to a certain extent. I had a great-great-uncle who was a bit of a rolling stone. He wandered a bit in those parts, and he left a diary, written rather like I write, but you could follow it in parts. I'll show it you later on. There's some quaint stuff in it. But it interested me, and last year when I was demobbed after the Armistice, I toddled up there to

have a look-see. I was not keen on going back to my old job in Bengal, and, as I'd saved a bit of cash, I thought I'd take a holiday, which I hadn't really done since I left school. So I trekked off to Kashgar and then east."

He fumbled in his pocket, pulled out a worn pocketbook, and extracted something which he passed across.

"Ever see anything like this?" he queried.

I examined the object closely. A silver coin, new-looking, but rough at the edges. On one side was a mass of Greek lettering. On the obverse was a man's head, rather clear-cut.

I turned it over again. The names on the coin were unfamiliar, and the head was unlike any coin I knew.

"What country is it, John? It's Greek, though the lettering is quaint, but whose is the head? It's not from Greece. Is it one of the funny little new States that the Peace Conference of the war to end war has started to ensure war going on?"

Wrexham looked at me despondently.

"You handle a pen quickly, Harry, but you're slow sometimes at deductions. Yes, it's Greek; but it's a long time since any one wrote Greek quite like that, and I think that the country it came from never heard of the Great War of 1914-18."

"Antique, is it?" I looked at it again. "It looks fairly new-make. Is it a copy? Central Asia's full of old Greek relics, I know. Have they started an antique mint in Kashgar in the hope of a tourist boom after the war? Where did you come by it?"

"Well, it's a long story, but, if you're doing nothing tonight, come over to my hotel and dine and I'll tell you. By itself the coin isn't much, but I've got two other exhibits which fit in. What is it 'Sapper' says? 'Once is nothing, twice is coincidence, three times is a moral certainty.' I think I've got a moral cert."

And not another word would he say on the matter then, shifting the conversation to France and Palestine, old scraps, old friends, all the miscellany of memories that make up the wandering soldier's life.

I slipped home and changed, and then to his hotel, where I found him awaiting me in the lounge with a tall, clean-shaven, fair-haired, blue-eyed man who seemed to carry a smack of the sea about him, though somehow I did not set him down as a sailor.

"You've not met Forsyth, have you, Harry?" said Wrexham. "This is Lake, Alec; you've heard me speak of him often enough."

As we shook hands while Wrexham busied himself attracting a servant for short drinks, I took stock of Forsyth. Taller than me by at least three inches — and I stand five feet ten in my socks — and broad with it, he looked the epitome of fitness. His skin was clear and smooth as a girl's, yet tanned to a ruddy brick colour that spoke of days of open air, clean fresh winds, and hot sunshine.

I couldn't quite place him, but somehow he conveyed an idea of big open spaces, and all the breadth of clean mental outlook that sometimes goes therewith.

Wrexham handed us out sherries, and marshalled us into a cool corner.

"Three wanderers well met, I think. Here's to us." He turned to me.

"Forsyth knows, perhaps, more Greek than you, Harry. He describes himself as a doctor, and tags weird letters after his name. But his real amusement in life is studying ethnology and anthropology and things like that."

"I've always been keen on ethnology, especially that of Eastern Europe, as a hobby; and after finishing my medical studies, I spent some months pottering about Greece on my own. It's a fascinating mixture of people down in the Balkan Peninsula to any one keen on studying different races. Also, I was one of those freaks with a leaning to Greek, even at school, before I came over to England."

"One of our Empire liaison links from Canada," continued Wrexham, "ex-R.N.A.S., sometimes amateur of ethnology, specially Greek; anything more, Alec?"

"You forget the ex-R.A.F., which landed me in this coun-

try to renew the threads of your acquaintanceship from Palestine days."

"True, O king, a somewhat murky past. But now, like me, you've cut adrift once more."

"And here I am to listen to a cock-and-bull story of yours tied up with old or new coins and a ragged diary, with which baits you propose to lug me many hundred miles into the back of beyond, instead of going back and looking for a decent job to earn an honest living. You have a persuasive manner, John. I suppose Lake is another babe in your hands?"

"He will be, I hope, before we've done with him. However, what about food? Then we can go up to my quarters and get down to the real stuff. Finished your drinks?"

He marshalled us into the dining-room, and once again the conversation slid west and north in the old grooves of war, till we finally adjourned to his room, and stretched ourselves on long chairs in the verandah. When his servant had deposited sodas, glasses, and whiskey and departed, Wrexham went to a metal despatch-case, and produced from it a small wooden box carefully tied up, which he placed mysteriously on the table.

Then, filling his ancient pipe, he spread himself in a long chair and commenced.

"First of all, I'm going to tell you about my trip beyond Yarkand last year. When you've swallowed that, I'll show you a thing or two.

"After my company left Palestine in January, '19, and came back to India, I got myself demobbed and pondered what I should do. Home lacked attraction, I'd been away so long. There was I with a certain amount of dibs, no calls, my own master, up in Pindi at the end of the Kashmir road with the hot weather coming on, and all the earth in front of me.

"I've always wanted to travel up that way, and this seemed the absolute chance. If I went home or back to my old job in Bengal, I might not get another opportunity for

years; my old firm in Bengal were good, but sticky in the matter of leave. So I packed my kit, dumped what I didn't want, motored to Srinagar, and took the road for Yarkand.

"I stuck to the main road practically all the way, steady, easy marches. And as I went I read everything I could find on the country. Most of my kit was books, I think, but by the time I hit Yarkand I had a working knowledge of Kashgaria at other people's expense.

"I moved fairly light, but I lugged the books along and also a few survey instruments. You remember that in Palestine I used to play about with survey toys.

"I stopped a bit at Yarkand to study local conditions, and work up the smattering of Turki that I'd been assimilating on the road up with the aid of a prehistoric textbook.

"From there I pushed on to Aksu, and hence towards Hami, always keeping to the main road. There's nothing to talk about during that part of the show. But when I got Hami-way, I put aside the printed books and restudied my great-great-uncle's diary."

He stopped and pulled meditatively at his pipe.

"What was the great-great-uncle doing up there, John?" I asked.

"He was a bit of a rolling stone, rather like me, I fancy. He started with a commission in the East India Company's army, got tired of it, went north, and joined the Sikh army. Then he dropped that and took to wandering. Went up into Kashmir. Thence he conceived the idea of following the old trade route into China. His library apparently consisted of Marco Polo.

"Three years later he turned up again in Ferozepur, where my great-grandfather, his brother, was commanding a regiment, and announced his intention of fitting out and going off again to Central Asia. But before he could start again he went out with cholera. However, before he died he gave my great-grandfather a diary and a bundle of old papers, and said that, if ever any other member of the family got the wanderlust, the papers were to be given to him.

"My great-grandfather, who was married, had no particular desire to travel, and, I fancy, after reading through the stuff, he locked it up and dismissed the whole lot as a traveller's yarn, due to overmuch Marco Polo combined with fever.

"My grandfather and my father were stay-at-homes, and I'm the first of the family to come back here. I brought with me the old papers and the diary that was with them more as idle curiosities — happened to notice them when I was on leave before coming back from France to Mesopotamia in 1916.

"Having nothing much to do, I read them through on board ship, and after that I read them fairly often, until I know bits, I think, by heart.

"A lot of them are mere scrappy notes about his journeys, rough drawings of places and types, and it's only after he struck east from Urumchi that the real interest comes into the diary. Pass me over that box, will you?"

Forsyth reached the box across to Wrexham, who undid it, and took out a small shabby leather-covered notebook.

"I'm going to read you something," he said, "that will tell you why I went north. As I said before, once is nothing, twice is a coincidence, three times is a moral cert. This is the 'once'; part of the 'twice' you've both seen in the shape of that coin; the 'three times' I've got here, and will show you presently."

He put the box on the table by him, opened the notebook — stained yellowish paper and crabbed writing in faded brown ink — and began to read aloud.

He read for a quarter of an hour, and at the end of that time both Forsyth and I had let our pipes go out, and were hanging on his words.

CHAPTER II

OLD JOHN WREXHAM'S DIARY

20th Jany. 1822

I WONDER if any one who read these lines would ever believe that I, John Wrexham, am writing naught but the sober truth. When I think over the events of the last month, it seems to me as if it were all a wild dream fantasy. And yet . . .

Islam Akhun's story of a king and his army engulfed in the sands and of the buried cities set me wandering, and lo! the city seems to be there after all these hundreds of years, and I, John Wrexham, am the first to have seen its gates. Or, stay, after what I saw in the valley, perhaps it were more true to say the first living man, for others less fortunate than myself would seem to have reached the entrance to the Gates, to find them only the Gates of Death.

But I must stop me musing, and set down the bare happenings ere my memory plays me tricks and fever come on anew.

It was the 2d December that I conceived my ill-fated trip, at least it was ill-fated for Islam and Arslan Bai. Was it ill-fated for me? Time alone can tell.

Northeast they pointed over the wastes of sand, and said that many days out into the desert lay a buried city, rich with treasures, in whose streets you might walk as though men left them yestereve, and gather up riches if you could but escape from the wiles of the spirits that guarded them, spirits that called you by name and bade you stay.

No; they had never seen it, but in their grandfather's father's time, one man, a treasure-seeker, one of the idle ne'er-do-wells that haunt the villages fringing the waste sands, had gone out with other two into the deserts in search of treasure, hoping perchance to gather in a few days wealth beyond the wildest dreams.

Many days later he returned, a ragged skeleton, gaunt eyes and blackened lips, nigh dead with thirst and fever. He died that night, and ere he died, close to the road where the story-tellers found him, he babbled a little of a gate, of armed men, of death.

None ever followed his quest: there are too many tales of hidden cities and treasures all up and down this sunburnt land, and men still

fear the trackless deserts, as they did when Messer Marco Polo traversed the desert of Lop, 'so great that 'tis said it would take a year and more to ride from one end of it to the other. . . .' And still talk they of the spirits that Polo mentions in his travels, which beguile men from their caravans and leave them to perish in the sands, so that 'in making this journey 'tis customary for travellers to keep close together.'

What was it that stirred my mind, so that all night long, when men and beasts lay sleeping, I sat wrapt in my furs in the cold wind gazing out to the northeast pondering? Was it chance? Was it fate? I know not, nor shall ever know, perhaps. But, ere the false dawn's faint light pearled the sky above me, I had made up my mind that, come what might, I, too, would face the desert and see whether it would reveal its secrets, or remain inscrutably mocking to the end.

Perchance my men thought I had been maddened by these same spirits when, next day, instead of continuing our road, I said I had changed my mind and wished to voyage northeast into the desert.

At first they refused to come, but finally, after much persuasion, they agreed on my promise that when half our water was used we would retrace our steps if naught had been found. The reward I spoke of, the chance of hidden wealth, and the guarantee of return ere our water failed, just outweighed their fears of the unknown desert of death, and of the spirits of evil that roamed in it.

Even then only Islam and Arslan would accompany me. But, indeed, I preferred a small party, since it was the less water to take. The others of our party and some of my gear we left to await our return. Not till the 11th December did we set forth — three men and three camels, one laden with food and gear, and two with skins of water.

Our way at first was easy, over sand-dunes of no immense height, though growing as we went, and we covered sixty miles in the first four days. Nothing to see but sand, sand, sand, trackless and rippled as the wild ocean's wave. Since I possessed neither map nor guide, I marched by compass, as might a sailor in an uncharted sea. Due northeast from our starting-point was the direction I chose. The old Chinese road lay southeast, and the men spoke of a track that led northward, so that our route midway between the two should bring us into the desert's heart.

It was on the evening of the fourth day that, far off on the northeast horizon I remarked what seemed like some faint cloud hanging

in the sky. After looking at it through my glass, I pointed it out to Islam, saying, "Snow," but he insisted it was but cloud.

But next evening again we beheld it, the same form, the same direction, and not a cloud beside in all the brazen sky.

Far mountain beyond a doubt. If there were no hidden cities, there were at least strange hills, and snow hills must mean water. Even Islam agreed now, though I saw he would liefer have found his city of gold than all the snow hills of wild Asia.

We pressed on, and on the evening of the sixth day, as the sun was sinking to his rest, perceived what I had sought all day in vain, the faint lilac haze below the white that I have noted marks always the lower hills below high snow.

The dunes were now greatly higher and more formidable, curved half-moons of sand, most wearisome to the legs, and the camels showed their distress from lack of water, since our scanty stock permitted but a mouthful for the beasts.

On the eighth day the snow peak gleamed more clearly, and in the light of evening the low hills showed sharp and clear maybe a bare thirty miles away.

Never a sign of water so far, and I thanked Providence greatly that we had made sixteen days' provision, though by now I felt assured that we should discover some at the foot of the hills. The next three days to the hills were in great measure easier, the dunes were daily lower, but we had perforce to give part of our water to the camels.

On the evening of the eleventh day we reached the foot of the hills, and then, alas! the foreboding that all day had clung to me was realized. The wall of hills was, indeed, a wall, almost sheer scarped cliff like the sides of an old Indian hill-fort, and many hundred feet high, with naught at foot but a short slope of tumbled rock half-buried in sand.

That night we camped below the gloomy cliffs, and I held that our earliest preoccupation in the morning must be to seek water along the foot. Surely somewhere the melting snow must find its way down, unless it drained to the northward.

Next morning we travelled twelve or thirteen miles, always under sheer scarped cliff, never a drop of water, never a sign of slope that we might climb. We moved eastward, since from far off it had seemed to me that the cliffs were lower that way. We had now but four days' scanty water left, and the heat of the desert, even at this cold season, was causing some loss by sweating through the skins in which we carried it.

Islam prayed me to start back forthwith making forced marches, but I was sure that water was to be found. Arslan, moreover, said that unless the camels could be fully watered they would die in the desert, and with them we also should perish, leaving our bones to whiten in the wastes of sand.

So next day again we started early, and all day travelled below the unfriendly cliffs, but never finding water, until late in the evening the camels, which till now had been barely able to drag their lank limbs along, quickened their dragging pace; and presently Islam, who was on ahead, called out loudly to me.

I hastened on to where he stood on a high rock, and saw before me a narrow valley opening into the cliff, and in the bed of the valley a little stream of clear water, and men and beasts drank their fill.

The cleft at whose dark mouth we stood was narrow, a bare twenty paces wide, and with the same scarped sides of incredible height. It wound away into the cliff, already partly hidden in the evening dusk, though where we stood was yet lit with the sun's last rays.

Reassured now by our find of water, we settled us down for the night, and in the morning refilled all water-skins. The dawn light showed a few stunted bushes and a dwarf tree or two, but no sign of human beings.

Leaving Arslan to tend the beasts, which found some scant grazing in the valley entrance, and taking Islam with me, I set about exploring the cleft. It got more and more narrow and darker and darker, until, after some three miles, we could touch the sides of smooth rock with our outstretched hands, but never, never a place that a man might climb. The cold was intense in this dark confined slit that knew the warm sun but for a brief space each day.

Then, rounding a sudden corner, came we to the end. The narrow valley opened upon a circus perhaps two hundred paces in diameter, sheer cliffs around it. But oh! the wonder of that evil place.

The valley closed again, and there before us, carved at the foot of the towering rock, was a gateway of old fashion with an inscription and a design of serpents upon it.

But even more strange was the ground at our feet. For it was covered with bones of men.

The bones were clean and white, and maybe old. But as we stood there concealed in the narrow cleft, there was a rush above us and a great white-necked vulture swept out from the cliff above, and then another and then another, circling down and down on their wide outstretched pinions.

We drew farther back into the shelter of the rock, thinking, perchance, they were spying us after the fashion these birds have in desert places where life is scarce, waiting on life for death to come.

But no, instead they fluttered down on the farther side, and gathered in ill-omened circle about something. Islam plucked my sleeve. "Come away, quick! Come away! 'Tis a place of ill-omen; these be spirits more like than birds."

But my curiosity was awakened, and, shaking him off, I advanced. As I got close the vultures flapped heavily away, and I saw what their foul wings had hidden. It was a man's body, of recent date, with no signs of death's grim decay, and the birds had not yet had time to disfigure it, so that I could see clearly what manner of man he was. A young man but — *white* — as white as I am. And of the manner of his death there was no doubt, for driven through his throat was an arrow, and below him on the ground was a pool of blood which had not yet dried, for when I tried to move him to see his hands it showed wet still.

I say his hands, for he lay stretched face upwards, but with his arms twisted under him, and then I perceived that his hands were bound behind him.

There were no clothes to show what class of person he had been; whoever had slain him had stripped off all he had.

I considered him with care. Features clear-cut like a statue of old time, with short dark brown curls. Then I noticed the arrow. Black-shafted and steel-barbed, with white marks upon the shaft. Writing surely in some strange tongue.

Islam by now had recovered a little of his courage and came over, but just as he reached me a sudden sound above us caused us to fly in unreasoning panic to the cleft whence we had emerged. It was but one of the heavy flying vultures, but it was some time ere we breathed easily again.

I stared out once more over the evil-smelling place of stone and sand and bone, dazzling white in the sun between the walls of black rock. Over against us the gateway loomed sinister and silent. The great stone portals were closed, nor were there windows, save on either side some arrow-slits as of an archer's gallery cut in the rock.

"Let us go," said Islam, "before we also are slain. Whoever killed that yonder must be within the gates."

But curiosity was stronger in me at that moment than fear.

"Stay you here, Islam," I said, "and if aught moves at the gate be ready to shoot." He was fumbling with his old matchlock.

Then, despite his appeals, I returned to the body with eyes fixed on the arrow-slits, ready to flee at sight or sound. But nothing moved nor stirred.

I studied the arrow again, and then tried to pull it out. It was of unfamiliar type, and might give the key to much. But I could not draw it forth, and so was forced to put my knee upon the dead man's chest, when presently, with some exertion of strength, I pulled it through. It had been shot from behind, and, entering to one side of the spine, stood out a foot and more beyond the throat.

As I stood holding it in my hand there was a crash like thunder, and I leapt across the open space like a deer to the cloud of smoke where Islam crouched behind a rock holding his smoking piece.

"Something moved in that slit," he gasped, and turned to flee.

Discretion seemed the better part of valour, and I followed him down the narrow waterway, splashing through the little pools, leaping from stone to stone.

But still I wonder whether he truly saw anything, or if his fancies overcame him.

By the entrance we found Arslan, who had heard not the shot, peacefully preparing food by the camels.

Islam contrived to scare him into the same unreasoning frame of mind as himself. Although I desired much to remain, there was no staying them, nor could I continue there by myself. Also, there was some reason, doubtless, in their arguments, three men against a savage tribe; 'twas poor odds in our favour. Speedily we roped up our gear and once more set out across the desert, as I judged, in the direction whence we had come.

Ploughing through the sand, I pondered over the events of the morning, but nothing could I understand. Of one thing alone I was assured, that the dead man was of some people I had never met in Asia. There are fair-skinned people a many there, but none to compare with him I had seen. Could he, perchance, have been a European? But had such a one been in the country, I must surely have heard of him. Save for myself, no European had been known up there.

When we halted that night, I studied the lettered arrow again, for the lettering seemed familiar. Finally, I recognized the unfamiliar script — the letters were Greek. My studies had long since fled, but there was no mistaking some of the letters, for not knowing the which my father had oftentimes caned me. I was clear bewildered by

now. What folk could these be in the heart of the great desert with arrows lettered in Greek?

As I write, the arrow is by me, sole token of my journey, sole witness of my tale.

The men were very silent that night, and their one thought seemed to be to put as many miles of sand as possible between themselves and the ill-omened cliff that faded behind us against the darkling sky.

Next day we started at dawn, and, as the light grew, I noticed that here and there among the sand-dunes were rock outcrops, which we had not seen coming. But the little stream had disappeared in the thirsty sand when we had gone a dozen miles, and once again there was no water save what the camels carried.

It was on the second evening that misfortune showed her ugly head. Arslan was troubled concerning one of the camels which paced very slowly. That night it refused the oil and the handful of grain we gave it, and laid its head on the sand, as these beasts do when they are sick.

The next morning it could scarcely walk, and ere evening it died. Here was, indeed, a serious loss, since we must part with either our gear or much of our water.

However, we reckoned that we had a sufficiency of water. The skins had been refilled ere we left the hills, and we had been but twelve days coming, while we had still thirteen days' supply. Even though our present route were somewhat longer, we should reach the main road in another ten days, eleven at most.

So, next morning, abandoning the dead camel and its load, we started on again. The wind, which had hitherto been little, freshened, and ere midday we were in the midst of a blinding sandstorm, and, though it cleared by evening, we covered but a few miles.

That day the second camel sickened, and within two days was dead. Thus were we forced to abandon the most of our gear. With naught save the scantiest food for ourselves and some powder and ball, we could just load enough water for seven days on the camel. By the evening of the seventh day we should surely reach the old Chinese road.

But once more sandstorms delayed us. Then two days later our last camel sickened. We dragged it along all next day, but it died that evening.

I calculated that we were now not much more than forty miles from the road. There was nothing for it but to take as much water as each

man could carry in a goatskin, with a scanty ration of food, abandon our gear, and plod on.

Whether it was that something had affected my compass, or whether in the sandstorms my computation of distance was inaccurate, I cannot say, but after traversing another thirty miles there was but a cupful of water left, and nothing in front but sand-dunes — high ones — a bad sign, since toward the desert's edge they grow lower.

The rest of the journey was a nightmare that I cannot write. Arslan went mad and refused to move, so that we had perforce to leave him while we struggled on seeking water and help. Two days later Islam collapsed, and I pushed on alone, and at dawn found myself among trees and fainted. When I came to, I found a wandering shepherd pouring water on my face.

When I was somewhat recovered, I had vast difficulty in getting him and his friends to come with me to search for Islam, but at last the sight of my money persuaded them. Following my tracks (by great good fortune the wind had dropped), we found Islam still breathing, but unconscious. Whether he was already weakly I cannot say, or whether the prolonged strain had been too much for him I know not, but he never recovered consciousness, and died that night. I could not induce them to go any farther, nor, indeed, was there any possibility of finding Arslan alive.

I made my way back westward, and found that I had reached the road seventy miles from where we had set out, which accounted for the extra length of our journey. I picked up my other men and the rest of my gear. Since Islam and Arslan were dead, I said naught to any man of our adventures beyond our failure to discover any ruined city, and our terrible journey back.

Some day I hope to go back and find out the secret of those unknown hills, but for the moment I feel drawn once more to look upon my kith and kin, and I shall make my way back to India and refit.

Wrexham closed the ragged diary and looked up. "Well," he said in his deliberate way, "and that is what I call the 'once,' which is nothing. When I've had a drink, I'll tell you about 'twice,' which, according to the expert, is merely coincidence. Manœuvre the whiskey, will you, Alec?"

Forsyth got up and opened the bottle and some sodas.

"Your old great-great-uncle either ought to have been a

journalist, or else he found something d——d quaint. Have you got the arrow at home?"

"No. I suppose it was stolen from his kit. He evidently had it with him all right, unless, as my great-grandfather seemed to think, he invented the whole yarn under the influence of fever."

I filled my glass. "It's the queerest tale I've heard for years. Of course, all deserts are full of fables, and I remember reading of the one your great-great-uncle mentions of the king and his army who were buried in the sand."

Wrexham sipped his drink. "Well, now, I'll get on with the second part, which is where I come in."

CHAPTER III

WREXHAM'S STORY

WE relit our pipes and settled back in our chairs, and Wrexham began:

"As I told you, when I got near Hami last year, I pulled out the old diary and read it again, especially the part I've just read to you two fellows.

"I won't go into details of how I found the tiny village, which, from certain entries in the diary, I am sure must have been my great-great-uncle's starting-point. I found the place, and there I decided to stop a bit. I can't tell you why I should want to stop in a tiny little hole like that with nothing to see, not even any old ruins in the neighbourhood; but somehow my old relative's story had taken hold of me, and I wanted to reconstruct it on the spot.

"You know how traditions linger in the East, more especially in those parts of it that are as yet untouched by the railway. Well, I made a few discreet questions, and sure enough there was a yarn of a white man who years before had gone out into the desert seeking old cities, and had come to grief owing to losing his way. The story was not too coherent, needless to say: sometimes he found a ruined city, sometimes he and all his people had died, and one particular version went on to the effect that he had found much gold, and got safely back, but was carried away by the spirits who watched over the treasure, and who were very wroth at its having been touched. It was a lot of trouble to get out the story — you know how difficult it is to get ignorant people like that to talk to strangers.

"But it was clear enough that some wandering white man had been there ages before, and, further, the local people seemed pretty afraid of wandering into the desert. I did not let on about the old man having had anything to do with

me. It's not a good thing to talk about bad luck being in the family, and certainly the old man did not hit it lucky that trip.

"I hung about prospecting and smelling out the ground, which, by the way, is very little known directly you get off the main route. Northeast you come slap on to the desert practically at once.

"The maps of it are quite useless, compiled from hearsay of wandering Indian or Chinese merchants, I think. I had the most up-to-date ones I could get from the Survey of India. Got hold of old Jones, who was our mapping expert in Palestine; you remember him, Harry.

"He sent me the best he had before I went off, but he wrote to the effect that I would be wise not to rely too much on anything north of the Hami-Urumchi road, barring the triangulated peaks.

"If you look at that atlas on the table there you will see that there is a big stretch of nothingness northeast of Kashgaria labelled Gobi Desert. It is part of the Gobi. For over three hundred miles in every direction it's got not a single name on it, not even a track. Northward there are two lakes shown with fifty miles of river leading nowhere; and, although I've not been there, I'm prepared to make a modest bet that they're not within one hundred miles of their proper location, even if they do exist. North again of that is Chinese Mongolia, almost unknown even now, and very vaguely mapped.

"So that between known Kashgaria and Mongolia there's a piece of country much bigger than England, almost unmapped, without even a known road in it. The southern edges of it are known to be desert; of the rest we know just nothing. And the northern side may be — as shown — some three hundred miles from the southern, or, on the other hand, it's just as likely to be five hundred or six hundred miles away.

"You could hide a country almost as big as Wales in it and never know of its existence, even if it were full of high snow

mountains. So you see, although my old namesake's story may be the result of a fever-stricken imagination, it's no ways impossible.

"Well, somehow, that country drew me more and more, but I saw that to try and explore it would require a good deal of preparation, and I had no idea of taking it on by myself if I could get another fellow or two to come along. So I decided to come back to India, and see if I could get hold of some one with globe-trotting tastes. I had you two in my mind's eye, and then I found Forsyth, and later on heard that you'd gone home, Harry.

"I stayed on up there a while just to get a bit more local knowledge, and the last week I came across that coin, and the finding of that is what I call 'twice' in my deduction series.

"Some miles from the village there's a bit of a rise where the sand-dunes on the desert's edge are rather big. One in particular is noticeably high: it's by a deserted building of sorts, quite a modern outfit, been abandoned perhaps twenty or fifty, at most a hundred, years. It bears northeast, and must be more or less the direction my great-great-uncle started from. I took rather a fancy to the place, and rode out there two or three times to study the country. A few extra feet elevation make a lot of difference in the desert.

"My men were accustomed to my going out there, and as a rule I took one or other to hold my horse while I did a bit of map-work, to try and get something more or less accurate.

"One particular day, the air being very clear — we'd had rain twice in the week, an uncommon phenomenon at that time of year — I thought I'd go and make a final visit to have a last check of the map.

"I rode out by myself that day on my old Kara Tagh mare. She was very quiet, and if you knee-haltered her loosely would stay for hours without trying to stray. I climbed up the high dune, and sat looking out over the desert, thinking about my old relative's tragic journey. It was warm

in the sun, and I had not slept well the previous night — an uncommon thing for me, as you know.”

I have seen Wrexham sleep quietly in the most noisy, disturbing places, when circumstances prevented him doing any work, and he had a little sleep to make up, or thought a reserve would be handy the next night or two. He is a most extraordinarily imperturbable person.

“It may be that I dozed for a few minutes and probably dreamt a bit. You see, I’d been reading my old great-great-uncle’s diary during the night when I couldn’t sleep. But I seemed awake all right. Well, presently a most extraordinary feeling came over me, of some one trying to attract my attention, some one very anxious that I should hear him.

“I really can’t explain what it was, but it got stronger and stronger. It was as though some one out in the desert was calling and calling to me, although, mind you, there was no sound.

“I sat staring out over the dazzling sand, and then, despite the peculiar sensation, I suppose I really did sleep, for the next thing that happened was that I *saw* a man in the desert, plodding through the sand. How far he was from me I could not say, but the impression was exactly the one you get looking at a fellow through a very high-power telescope. You can see him apparently only a few feet away, and yet you *know* — although you can make out the buttons on his coat and almost see the colour of his eyes — that he’s really quite a long way off.

“You remember that Hun sniper you showed me through a signal telescope one day in France, Harry: seemed as if he was six feet away instead of nearly a hundred yards? Well, that was the impression.

“This fellow was plodding drearily through the sand, dragging his feet as though dead beat. His face was grey and haggard, and his lips black and swollen, and his eyes all red. I didn’t see his clothes clearly at all, and have no recollection of what they were like, although, I remember the absolutely done-in appearance of his whole figure.

"As I watched him staggering on, he fell, and lay still a minute. Then he pulled himself up on one arm — he gave me the impression, by the way, of having only one arm — and looked my way, and his lips seemed to be working. Then again I got that inexplicable sensation of some one trying to make me hear over great spaces.

"I suppose I woke up then, for suddenly the man disappeared, and there was only the bare empty desert before me once more. But stronger than ever was the sensation of some one far off calling and calling in a silent voice.

"Well, I sat there a bit, and sometimes the feeling was stronger and sometimes fainter, but always there, rather like when you're listening to a distant sound across a valley, and sometimes the wind almost sweeps it away, and then suddenly there it is again clear and sharp.

"Well, eventually I went back to camp.

"I'm not a fanciful bloke, and I don't believe in spooks or all this spiritualistic tosh, most of which is faked. But I am ready to admit that there are lots of things we don't understand, things like telepathy and so on; and do what I could, I could not get rid of the feeling that some one was calling to me out in the desert.

"Although I tried to put it down to the aftermath of a vivid dream, I could not rid myself of it; and further, something seemed to keep on reminding me that I hadn't really been to sleep, and the reasonable part of me that insisted on the dream theory couldn't say that I had either.

"Eventually I decided that I would do something — for me — quite mad. I would push out a little into the desert. I had *chagals*¹ and things to take enough water for myself and a couple of men for four days, and the camels could do without any for that time. That meant about thirty miles out and back.

"So I told Sadiq, my head camel fellow, and another man that I wanted to look at the desert a bit, and left old Firoz — you remember him in my company in France: he's with me

¹ Water-skins.

now as sort of orderly since he left the army — to look after the camp.

"We went out two days in the direction I figured out that my old relative must have taken.

"By the way, the most extraordinary thing was that the moment I gave my orders to Sadiq, the feeling of some one wanting me suddenly vanished.

"We found nothing either day, absolute dead desert. The third morning, while the men were roping up things for our return, the feeling suddenly came on again. Only this time, for some unaccountable reason, it seemed as if the thing or person were close at hand. It worried me a lot. I couldn't go on, of course; we had only enough water to see us back.

"There was a particularly high dune about six hundred or seven hundred yards from the camp, and finally I said to myself that I'd go up and have a last look from the top with my glasses. I told the men to finish loading up and then wait for me.

"The feeling was very strong as I trudged over the sand, and then, just as I got to the top, it absolutely disappeared again. It never came back either.

"But as I looked down from the top I knew why the feeling had left me. There, in the dip of the sand below me on the far side, lay a man, curled up as though asleep. I knew then that I had not been asleep that first day.

"I ran down the dune to his side hoping that he was only asleep, though somehow at heart I doubted it. Then, as I bent over him, I knew he was not sleeping, or rather that he had gone to sleep for good and all.

"There was nothing much in that; one had seen plenty of dead men before. Besides, it was the 'flu-time still in those parts, and I had picked up people dying or dead along the roadside more than once. But the point was that this was not the roadside, and it puzzled me as to what the man could have been doing in this out-of-the-way corner miles and miles away from any road, even what Central Asia calls a road.

"I examined him closely, and then I sat down and thought

quick and hard. Remember that at that time I had been reading the old diary rather a lot, and this man was a shock to me apart from the way I had located him.

"He was gaunt and haggard, and by the look of him had suffered from hunger and thirst before he pegged out; in fact, I rather thought he had died of thirst.

"But that was nothing much; it was first his colour, for as I lifted his arm the loose sleeve slipped back, and the arm was nearly as white as mine. I don't think he can have been dead more than a couple of days at most. And his type of features was quite unlike the average man in those parts, far too straight and regular. However, fair-skinned people are common enough in North Asia, though not as a rule quite as fair as this man.

"But the next thing I noted was that his wrists were all chafed, as though his hands had been bound recently. Remember I had been reading that diary. I looked at them very carefully for fear I might be imagining things, and the marks were more noticeable on the other arm than on the one I first touched.

"I pulled his clothes open to see if there were any marks or papers, and then I got the shock of my life. Around the shoulder was a blood-clotted bandage that had slipped to one side, and below it showed an open wound in the muscles just below the joint. There was a similar wound at the back.

"It was the sort of wound a sharp shell-splinter makes, or, if you like, the sort of wound that would be made by a steel-shod arrow that had passed right through the top of the arm, and then perhaps been pulled through or broken off."

Wrexham paused and refilled his pipe. I think he was waiting for us to say something, but we both were silent. I've known Wrexham pretty intimately for some years, and he does not invent things, nor does it intrigue him to pull people's legs with fairy stories. He is, moreover, a most matter-of-fact person, rather sceptical as a rule, and not inclined to believe anything that he cannot see himself. His reports in

the field, albeit painfully written and laboriously compiled, used to be masterpieces of accurate information.

Seeing neither of us ventured any remark, he went on:

"Then I started hunting through his kit. His clothes were rather unfamiliar in type: there was a short skin outer garment, much like the *poshtin*¹ common to most of the cold parts of Asia, though the embroidery on it was of unfamiliar pattern. Under that he wore a sort of short pleated smock of very fine cloth though worn, a fawn-coloured linen it seemed to be; and around the throat, and at the skirt edges, it was embroidered, again in the same unfamiliar pattern in green.

"He had long drawers of the same material as the smock, gartered in below the knees with thin strips of fineish green leather, and on his feet twisted leather sandals of a pattern quite new to me, not unlike Kashmiri *chaplis*, but with far more intricate plaiting.

"Round his waist was a twisted leather girdle, from which hung a short knife and a leather wallet. I opened the wallet and found some coins — you've seen one of them, and as you can imagine they, too, set me thinking — and there was something more besides that I'll show you presently. There was nothing else of note. But while searching him I came to the conclusion that, if he hadn't died of thirst, he might have died from sepsis from his wound. I had to bend pretty close, you see.

"Well, I did some pretty quick thinking. The coincidence between this fellow and what old John Wrexham wrote was too marked not simply to stick out. I felt sure then that the old man wrote cold, sober truth. Now for many reasons I didn't want my men to see this body. They might start thinking too much and making up yarns that would queer my pitch if I managed to start an expedition. I can tell you, the sight of this man made me absolutely resolved to set out across the desert as soon as I could fix up a show that would give some chance of success.

"So I straightened him out and left him, but, before doing

¹ Fur-lined skin coat.

this, I cut the straps of his wallet and pushed it and the short knife into the big haversack I was carrying.

"Then I went back to the top of the sand-dune and got out my mapping stuff — not that I had any intention of doing much: I was too busy wondering about it all and trying to evolve theories, but I didn't want my men to notice anything unusual. I expect, if they looked up at me at all, they thought I was carrying on in the usual way with my map spread out all businesslike.

"That night, when the men had dossed down, I sat up studying the contents of the wallet, and the next day made up my mind to come back to India as fast as I could travel and set about finding one of you two and going north again."

"'Once is nothing, twice is coincidence,'" quoted Forsyth. "You've got hold of the queerest kind of story, but as yet I see no light, save that it seems to substantiate your ancient uncle's yarn. But why in hell you should find a man in practically the same circumstances as he did one hundred years ago has me cold. If I didn't know you, I should say you were pulling our legs."

"Then you can just imagine how much I wondered that night and many after. The coincidence was too absurdly striking, too close to be real, it seemed; and yet there it was, hard, undeniable fact. But before I go on I'll show you what I call 'three times,' the 'moral cert.'"

He reached over for the box on the table, opened it, and pulled out just such a leather wallet as he had described, and then a short knife of unusual shape, which he laid beside it under the light.

"Ever seen a knife like that?" he asked.

I shook my head. It was unusual in shape, short, rather broad-bladed with curved hand-guard, obviously a stabbing dagger, but of what nationality I could not say. But what held my eye more than its shape was the faint filigree of silvery metal lines hammered or welded into the bluish steel of the blade. They seemed to form letters of a kind, though not easily decipherable.

Forsyth picked it up and examined it. "I have, but" — he looked at us both — "they were in a museum, and labelled 'Scandinavian — old,' and they didn't have this filigree stuff."

"I thought you'd say something like that," said Wrexham. "I looked up a book on old weapons as soon as I got back to India. Now for exhibit No. 2, as the policeman calls it."

He opened the wallet and took out a flat object wrapped in folds of soft cloth, which he unrolled.

"I don't think you've ever seen things like that in any museum," he said as he laid the object down.

We both bent over it and simultaneously exclaimed.

It was a little portrait of a girl, painted on what seemed to be a sort of matt-stone or very hard plaster. The colours were fresh and vivid, and the art was of a high standard. But the face held us more than the fashion of its depicting.

It was a girl looking slightly downward, as though at something she was holding in her hands. Masses of heavy brown hair with a glint of gold, eyes of deepest blue with a violet tinge screened with long lashes, under finely pencilled dark brown eyebrows, and a skin of rose and ivory with faint blue transparent shadows down the graceful curve where the neck entered the filmy garment that swathed the outlined shoulders.

"I'd cross a good many deserts to meet a girl like that at the far side," said Forsyth, as he laid down the picture. "Do you mean to say that that was in the wallet?"

"It was," said Wrexham; "but you've not seen all there is to see."

He turned over the picture, and pointed to some words written on the back, in unmistakable Greek, a clear-cut delicate writing, in vivid black.

"Tell me what that means, either of you?"

We bent over it again. Some of the letters differed slightly from the usual type of classic Greek, but the meaning was quite clear, though the word-endings were unusual.

The long Canadian was the first to speak.

"It's Greek of a semi-classical type, I should say. I've seen stuff not unlike it before, though there are unusual points about it. It runs: 'God keep my brother safe where'er he go. Euphrosine.' You agree with that, Lake?"

"Absolutely. It's perfectly easy to read, though the terminations are neither modern nor quite classical."

I turned to Wrexham.

"Read us the riddle, John. I think you've found the 'three times,' the 'moral cert,' though God knows what it all means."

CHAPTER IV

THE GREAT DECISION

WREXHAM refilled his pipe and settled back in his chair once more. Then he went on:

"I'll give you first of all my reading of the things I've just told you, and you can tell me whether you think I'm on the right lines.

"In the first place, what do we know for certain? That somewhere in the west corner of the Gobi Desert, a large unknown bit of country, a man of apparently white race has been found. Also, a hundred years ago, my great-great-uncle says he found these unknown mountains, an old gate, and a dead white man.

"Further, that the weapons and other things found on my man are of old type. Then these strange people use Greek, or a form of it. As probably you both know, there was a lot of Greek intercourse with Central Asia about the dawn of the Christian era, and before it. There are races in Afghanistan and the north of India with unmistakable Greek characteristics to this day, and numerous legends of the days of Alexander still survive all up and down the Indian border.

"Now, to my mind all these facts are capable of but one explanation — namely, that hidden in that desert is some isolated settlement of fair-skinned people, perhaps from the old days of Greek domination in Central Asia. Since there is not even a legend about them in the local countryside, it is pretty clear that they have been cut off for a good many centuries. Possibly at some remote period they crossed the desert, which, perhaps, was not so extensive then, before the dry area which has buried so many towns in that part began to form. Or perhaps they were driven out by one of the succeeding waves of invasion from China, and fled northward until they came upon this hidden refuge.

"Whether they are all still of pure white type is not clear, though the two individuals seen seem to be. My man certainly was. The picture of the girl further points to at least some of them having retained all their original racial characteristics.

"I take it both of you agree with this part of my theory?"

"I can think of nothing else that fits the facts," said I. "What has Forsyth got to say about it?"

"I agree entirely with Wrexham. The writing on the back of the picture is certainly recent. I've done a bit of research work with old manuscripts and so on — rather a hobby of mine one time — and I'll take my oath that that writing is not more than a few years old, judging by the ink, although the type of script must go back hundreds of years. It's impossible that any of the present Turki or Chinese inhabitants could or would write stuff of that sort. And how could they imagine or invent an old Greek name like 'Euphrosine'? Unless some daft European, with a gift for forgery and a knowledge of old Greek script, is faking antiques in the middle of the Gobi Desert, there's only one reading, and that's the one Wrexham has given us."

"Well, since you agree with the first part of my thesis, I shall go on with the second," continued Wrexham. "The first part establishes, as far as one can, the probability of some forgotten Greek settlement to be found beyond the northeast corner of Kashgaria. If so, it's more than worth looking for. But before I go on, are either of you prepared to come with me? It's an eighteen months' job at the very least, and possibly longer. But it's worth it, I think. Think of the old scientific blokes in Europe if we come back with an authentic account, complete with photos, and records, and perhaps with some of the inhabitants of an old Greek settlement probably much as it was in the days of Alexander.

"Whether or not there's money in it, I don't know. You, Harry, are probably not out for money, having enough for your wants. I am personally, but not much. I'm rather a wanderer, and nothing would please me more than a life of

exploration. If we can pull this off, we shall be made men in the exploring world, and can be sure of getting sufficient financial support in future to make further expeditions."

I've said that I've always had a taste for travel, and have spent not a little time and money on gratifying it. And here was Wrexham not only holding out a prospect of exploring an entirely unknown bit of the world, but gilding the lily with what looked like very good presumptive evidence of living survivals from past centuries. There was nothing much to draw me home. My only close relative was my sister, made a widow by Loos, who, with her two boys, kept the old manor-house farm warm for me. I had settled part of my income on her, and with that and her own little bit of money, she could keep the manor-house home up comfortably and pay for the boys' schooling. On chucking the service, my idea had been to spend the summers at home and the winters globe-trotting.

So my mind required no making up.

"Count me in," I said to Wrexham. "Central Asia's called me ever since I first came East, and here you are with a whole lot of extra attractions."

"And you, Alec? You weren't certain before," said Wrexham.

Forsyth leaned across the table, took up the picture, and gazed at it again.

"No, but you'd only told me part of the story. I'll start to-morrow if you like."

"Good! I thought you would both come. Then, now I'll go on with the second part of my thesis as to how my great-great-uncle and I found two men under such very similar circumstances. You admit that the coincidence is more than strange.

"You remember that the old man came upon a small enclosed space at the end of the valley full of bones, and among them a new corpse killed by an arrow under the entrance gates.

"I find a man whose hands have been bound, and who has

been also wounded by what might have been an arrow. Note further that No. 1 was found stripped, although his hands were bound. Ergo, he was stripped before he was killed, otherwise they'd have had to undo his hands to get his kit off.

"No. 2, on the other hand, has clothes and escapes, and what is more is armed. You don't tie up an armed man to shoot. Note also that my old relative makes no mention of his fellow's legs having been tied, and my man's did not seem to have been.

"Now, I thought an awful lot over these two. And this is what it seems to me. Quite obviously men whose arms are bound are prisoners. Execution without the gates was a very typical method in all old countries, and common even now in the East.

"My own idea — perhaps fanciful — is, therefore, that whoever run this place, when they want to kill off any one, they put him outside the gates with his arms bound, and shoot him with arrows either from the gates or from the arrow slits. Possibly the idea of leaving his legs free is to give the fellow a last sporting chance of getting away to take his luck in the desert if he can bolt before he's killed.

"Now, my fellow seems to have had a sister — a cultured person, one would say — not the sort of sister you'd associate with a common criminal.

"My idea is that she bribed the executioners not to shoot straight, and that he bolted into the valley, where, by some preconceived arrangement, he found clothes and food, and then freed his hands against a sharp rock. He was a strongly built young fellow, and probably would make the best fight he could, even despite his wound. Possibly he knew that they were going to drop him stuff over the cliffs somewhere in the valley.

"Now, in view of the sister, it seems unlikely that he was a common criminal. A more likely solution would be either some particularly tyrannical rulers, or possibly some kind of bitter civil war. I have my own ideas as to how he got across the desert, which I can explain better when we get there.

"What do you think of my solution so far?"

We had to agree that it was as logical as any interpretation we could put upon it.

"Well, then, and this is why I've given it at length. If we find the place, and if we succeed in getting in, we want to be well armed, and, what's more, have some one more reliable than the local Turkestani camel men. I have Firoz still. Could you, Harry, rake up a reliable sepoy to come?"

"I've got Payindah here now. Like Firoz, he's left the army and toddles round with me. You remember him that day near Festubert when you got that gash across your face. Big Punjabi with green eyes."

"By Jove, yes. Chap that had his bayonet smashed, and then killed another fellow with the broken end?"

"Yes, that's him. He was very excited to-night when I said I'd run across you and was coming over to dine here. I expect he'll come to make his salaams to-morrow."

"He's just the very article. Used to be pally with Firoz, too, I remember.

"Well, the other thing is, that we may find when we get there that the gate and the valley are peculiarly unhealthy. Therefore, I suggest that in making up our kit we include some kind of light strong ropes and other climbing gear. You, Harry, I know are a good climber, and Alec says he has done a bit of mountaineering at different times. Then, if the gate is no go, we can hunt around and try and find some other way in over the cliffs."

"There's something in that," said Forsyth. "From your great-great-uncle's account, the valley did not seem exactly the sort of place you could walk in by if the folk inside hadn't invited you and didn't like your face."

"The last thing I want to suggest is that we take along some kind of medical kit for Alec. If we find these people are really there, they are likely to be fair to middling mediæval, if not even more primitive, though the girl's picture rather rules out their being anything approaching savages. Therefore, a perfectly good and moderately well-equipped medi-

cine-man might prove a most useful passport in the country. For the same reason I'm lugging along a few oddments in the engineering line to startle the natives with."

"Yes," said I, "all that seems very sound. Now, when do you propose that we start? The passes are no good before April, and that's four months away."

"Well, first of all we've got to fit out. I've got a list of kit all worked out, but we must get down to Bombay or Calcutta where one can get things. This place is no good."

"Then I shall go on down to the C.P. and carry on with my shoot. Would you care to come as well? From there we can go on to Calcutta and fit out."

"Yes, rather. I've never seen a tiger outside of a cage," said Forsyth. "What about you, John?"

"Yes, I'll come along, but I won't stop long. Directly after Christmas I'll push on and start getting things together, and you can meet me at Calcutta."

"Then that's that, and now for bed. One thing, John. How do you account for finding your man? I don't mean the shooting part and the sister, but the rest? It's one of the most extraordinary things I ever heard."

"I don't attempt to account for it really. But although, as you know, I don't profess any particular kind of religion, I do believe that something or some one runs the show with some very clear design. And just as the smallest part in the biggest machine has to be made to work on appointed lines, so, too, each one of us must have some definite part to play, though we may not know what it's all about while we're doing it. In this case I hope it doesn't sound as if I was talking through my hat when I say that I really do believe that for some reason or other we're meant to get to this country which we think exists.

"Remember that my getting there didn't save that fellow's life. Also, you can't quite account by mere telepathy for my feeling of some one calling me. The first day, perhaps, yes. He was probably just about dying then, and maybe his calls for help travelled in some unknown way to me, the nearest human being.

"But — when I started off into the desert — the impression disappeared, and did not reappear until I was on the point of turning back. Then it suddenly reappeared stronger than ever, and the man had been dead two days.

"I was clearly not meant to save his life, but I do think, queer as it may sound, that I was meant to find his body.

"That, combined with the chance of my great-great-uncle finding the country, the chance, if you call it so, of my picking up those old papers at home before I came out, and the chance of my being able to go up to Central Asia and of being there just at that particular moment, to me point to the fact of our being intended to get to that hidden country.

"Why I or either of you or all of us are wanted there, and what we are to do when we get there, the Power that starts us off alone knows. But I cannot help the feeling that we are meant to get there, and that we shall get there. Then beyond that all is a blank. But the getting-there part seems to me Sapper's 'three times' — simply a moral cert."

"As for me, I don't believe in anything particularly, and it's all quite beyond me," said Forsyth. "But the prospect is pleasing enough without worrying about the why and wherefore. I shall look forward to trying twentieth-century medicine on second-century Greeks."

And on that we went off to bed, after arranging to meet next morning to fix up our journey on to Bombay.

But — unlike Wrexham and Forsyth — I do profess a belief — a very definite, concrete one; and, when I said my prayers that night, I prayed that we might have fortune in our undertaking, and if He meant us to go there — which, after Wrexham's story, I could not but believe — that we might have grace and strength to carry out whatever He wanted of us.

Before I went to sleep, I read one of my "bed books," and happened upon the verse of Psalm 23: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me."

A suitable verse for old John Wrexham's gateway, I thought, and so went to sleep.

CHAPTER V

THE JUMPING-OFF LINE

I SHALL not lengthen out an already long record by describing our journey from Calcutta, where we did much of our fitting-out, up to Kashmir, on over the passes to Yarkand, and thence round the north of the Tarim Desert. Nor shall I describe the high passes of the snow-line, nor the precipitous cliff roads and the overhanging *paris*, nor the grey snow-fed torrents we traversed. The journey was full of interest and incident, and we met all kinds of strange peoples. Ladakhis, in heavy duffle clothes, Chinese merchants in high felt boots, Khirgiz men in big mushroom hats, and Khirgiz women in tall white head-dresses recalling pictures of Plantagenet days, long caravans of shaggy camels, droves of fat-tailed sheep — such were our acquaintances as we wound along day after brief day and week after long week on our little mountain ponies or on foot over the towering heights. Nor is there space to describe our adventures with officious Chinese Ambans, who were over-punctilious in the matter of passports, and who had to be pacified in various ways.

Sufficient has already been written by various writers concerning these well-known highways, and this aims at being a record of adventure rather than a guide-book. In any case, beyond Aksu I have altered the names and localities and the compass bearings pretty considerably. Having made a few discoveries, we are not inclined to give them away. Recent happenings have altered our ideas on the commercial value of book, photo, and lecture rights, and for the moment, anyway, we have no desire to indicate our footsteps too closely to others who might wish to follow.

So, saving for the fact that we passed within measurable distance of Hami on our way into the Gobi Desert beyond it, this record will not give any particularly valuable data.

It was the end of November when we met in the Gymkhana at Karachi; it was late September of the following year that at last saw us at our starting-place, the tiny village Wrexham had visited on his first trip. The particular point from where I am now taking up the story is vivid in my memory, because it was the day after we had lost our cook. He had long been a thorn in our sides, more particularly in Wrexham's, who ran our messing arrangements. Still he had some ideas of the preparation of food in a form more or less consumable by Europeans.

Whether he was tired of long marches, or whether he was afraid of going too far toward China, or whether he considered that Wrexham was too knowledgeable a person for an "honest" Ladakhi to get rich on, and that more profitable pickings could be got with some passably ignorant sahib whose business was the securing of record heads in the mountains, one or two of which folk we had met on our journey up, I can't say.

Anyway, the day we left Aksu (he had drawn the balance of his pay the day before under the pretext of remitting it home through some Indian money-lenders who had cashed cheques for us) he just was not. Wrexham rode back to Aksu to see if he could be found, but failed to discover any traces of him. The man had just vanished. Doubtless he had joined some passing caravan or else hidden with some acquaintance in Aksu. This put us in rather a quandary, for we did not relish the idea of living for the future on purely native food.

And that was the point where we first realized the extraordinary value of that Admirable Crichton, Firoz Khan, Punjabi Mohammedan, of the Salt Range, ex-sapper and miner and devoted slave of Wrexham. He had served on three fronts, finally cutting his name, to follow Wrexham as body-servant and orderly and general master of the household to Central Asia in 1919.

Possibly in India pride of race would have prevented him offering his services, but here in the wastes of Kashgaria, among a people who know not caste, the old Hindu traditions

which tend to hamper the Mussulman in India fell from him completely.

We were rather despondently making our evening meal off tinned stuffs requiring no cooking which Payindah Khan, my ex-sepoy orderly and present body-servant, had laid out for us. Payindah had learnt the art of waiting at table in East Africa, when most of our Indian servants had faded away into hospital. When I sent in my papers Payindah had demanded to be taken along wherever I was going, to superintend my "household," as he called my odd servants and grooms.

Wounded in France, again in East Africa, again in Palestine, the last time pretty badly, he was a Punjabi Mussulman of the old type pre-war soldier. Uneducated yeoman farmer, whose knowledge of letters amounted to a painful slow scrawl which purported to be his signature, and a rapid and accurate but utterly incomprehensible method of doing accounts which saved me a good deal monthly on the bills my following produced, he was gifted with a quick mother-wit and a shrewd skill in judging men that was worth all the cheap board-school type of education that we are trying to thrust on unwilling India at the request of the babu politician.

He was a childless man, wifeless, too, since the 'flu year, and for some reason had not married again. I asked him one day who was going to inherit his land in Salt Range if he didn't marry, and he told me that his nephew, a fine strapping lad who had been in my company during the war, would take it on, and there were two smaller editions at home waiting to get big enough to join the regiment and let the nephew go back to their land.

Fighting stock were Payindah's folk. Of the five brothers three were buried on different fronts. Another — crippled from a shell wound — helped the old white-bearded grandfather, with the string of early frontier campaign ribbons, to run the family acres in the Salt Range that their folk had held since time immemorial.

However, I was really talking about Firoz.

After we had finished our meal, and Payindah was clearing away, Firoz came and started on the subject of the cook.

He lamented that he had not had the presence of mind to tie the low-born, self-styled Mussulman — might his face be blackened for all time — to a camel-saddle that night after he had drawn his money. After a lot of talk he got down to the real business — namely, that, until we could get a decent cook, *he* would feed us, and appealed to Payindah for support in the suggestion.

“Without doubt, sahibs,” said Payindah, “Firoz is a cook of the best after the manner of our folk. It is better that the sahibs should eat decent Punjabi food cleanly cooked by a person of repute than shorten their days by that which one of these half heathen — such as might be got for a price in the bazaars — would prepare.”

“Even so,” chorused Firoz; “and although I know not the ‘side dishes’ and the ‘first-courses’ of the sahibs, still I can cook good *pillaus* and *kababs* such as the sahibs have in mess sometimes. Also my *chupattis* will be far better than the bread that son of perdition used to make, such that Wrexham sahib once broke a knife cutting it.”

This last remark was true, and the resultant disturbance may have been one of the causes of the cook’s going.

Anyway, we heartily agreed that a turn of Punjabi cuisine by Firoz could not be worse and might be far better than what we had suffered at our late cook’s hands. And so it proved once we had broken him of the habit of smothering things in oil.

This disappearance of the cook was in one way a blessing, as it was one less mouth for our expedition across the desert. We were anxious not to take any of the local people with us, since, if we found anything worth having, we wished rather to keep the knowledge to ourselves. We had bought our own camels at Yarkand so as to render us independent. The only local man we kept on continuously was a Turki camel-driver. Since the country we were going into was quite unknown,

there was nothing to be gained from the knowledge the local people possessed. Hence we had simply hired extra men for a few stages at a time, replacing them by others as we went along.

The one exception, the camel-driver, a man who had accompanied Wrexham in 1919, Sadiq by name, was passably honest and trustworthy, and seemed to be a wanderer with no particular relatives. He had, however, sufficient local standing to serve to keep us in touch with the countryside on our way up from Yarkand, and was extremely useful in looking after the camels and the hired men. Both Firoz and Payindah had a good knowledge of the beasts, Firoz having learnt much about them in Palestine, where he had been transport lance *naik* of his unit.

For our journey across the desert we had reduced our kit to a minimum.

The main question was water, and for that we had brought special tanks from India of galvanized iron, holding seventeen gallons apiece, two full tanks making the camel-load. We had four camel-loads of water, making one hundred and thirty-six gallons in all, which, considering men alone, would give us rather over five gallons a day for the seven of us for twenty-five days. If we did not find the hills old John Wrexham had written about, we ought to be able to make our way back all right, since the consumption of food and water would automatically lighten the loads of the camels, and heavier stores could be shifted off the other beasts, who by that time would be pretty tucked up.

Still, I don't think any of us feared not finding the hills and the stream or water of sorts. We were all thoroughly convinced that the story was true. The coincidence of Wrexham finding the dead man in the desert tallied too much with the account in his great-great-uncle's diary for the original story to be an invention. Our main preoccupation was how to get into the country, and the kind of reception we were likely to get. We had also arranged to start with one camel-load of full rations for men, which should last us three weeks easily,

or a month if we were very careful, and about one and a half camel-loads of grain and oil for camels, giving starvation ration for about the same period. We were chancing our arm over the matter of food for the camels, and they could not possibly stay anything like that period without water; but within five days of starting we could count on ascertaining whether or not there was any snow mountain in the distance, and if so we could safely risk giving part of our water to the camels. If nothing whatever was seen after six days, we should, of course, have to consider the question of returning.

One camel carried our personal baggage, a very limited amount for each, our books, maps, survey instruments, and so on. Another carried ammunition, of which we brought a fair amount. We might, if we got into the country alive, have to fight, and we all agreed that ammunition was a *sine qua non*. To save complications in the matter we had standardized our armament. There were five .303 rifles, one for each of us, and one each for the two Punjabis. These we carried ourselves. We had two thousand rounds of ammunition, a liberal allowance for eventualities.

Wrexham, Forsyth, and I each had a forty-five automatic Colt pistol with one hundred and fifty rounds apiece. And on the ammunition camel we had a twelve-bore gun with some three hundred cartridges for shooting for the pot. The rest of the camel's load was made up of a small tool outfit for Wrexham, who, unlike many sappers, was a man of his hands, and never better pleased than when doing odd jobs, and a goodly medical outfit for Forsyth, as we had agreed at Karachi.

The ninth camel carried climbing gear, ropes, and the like, oddments of camp kit, and an eighty-pound tent, with nearly a half-load of rations for the camels.

Lastly, we had one spare beast which could be used for riding at a pinch if any of us fell sick, but was primarily intended to replace any casualty. All ten were very carefully picked animals, and we had got them into the best of condition

against the hardships they would have to face once we struck out into the desert.

We had decided to leave the road at Wrexham's village and march by compass on a bearing of fifty-two degrees. Old John Wrexham said he went due northeast (forty-five degrees), and then had had to go right-handed for nearly two days before he reached the valley. On the assumption that his records were accurate, the bearing of fifty-two would bring us to the hills about a day's march from the valley. On the other hand, if — as was likely in view of his troubles coming back — the distance was more than he had estimated on the outward journey, it would put us closer still to the valley, perhaps within a mile or two.

At Wrexham's village we filled up with water — we had made up our food loads at the last town and lived on local produce since — and added a little in the way of such fresh vegetables as were procurable. We spent two busy days there, finally fitting out and doing various odd repairs to gear such as are rendered necessary after a long march.

Wrexham, who had now a pretty useful knowledge of Turki, spent most of his time talking to the inhabitants, and asking questions about routes in the desert, and in carefully creating an atmosphere favourable to the reasons he gave for our trip. He announced that we intended travelling on to the next big town, but, instead of following the road, we were going to move parallel to it about two days' distance into the desert in search of ruined towns, abandoned as the country desiccated and the desert grew.

All the way along we had displayed a keen (and not altogether fictitious) interest in archæology, employing our various halts in visiting old ruins, and here and there buying small antique or pseudo-antique relics.

As a consequence we had no difficulty in making people believe our story, and in any case there was no reason for them to think that we were mad enough to want to strike straight into the unknown and pathless desert to the north. We had not told either the Punjabis or Sadiq what our real

destination was, lest they should give it out to all and sundry.

Our final departure was fixed for the 1st October, and we intended to make an early start and carry out as long a march as possible.

We had everything except the barest necessities packed up the night before ready for loading, and held a final inspection of water-tanks and stores before it got dark.

After we had finished our evening meal and the two Punjabis were packing up the last oddments, we three sat out at the entrance of our little tent muffled up in *poshtins*, for the nights were by now pretty cold.

"We've reached the jumping-off line, and zero hour's pretty near," said Forsyth. "I wonder what we shall find at the far end?"

"Water, I trust," said Wrexham, the ever practical; "for if we don't we shall have to turn about and scuttle back double time."

"I wasn't thinking of water, you unromantic materialist. I want to know the kind of people we're going to find. Think of finding a bit of the ancient world still in being. Lord, think of the yarns one would have to tell when one got back home! I'd make a few stuffy professors I know sit up some," replied the doctor.

"If the local inhabitants are as pleasant-looking as the lady Euphrosine of the picture, I should think you could make even the driest of old inhabitants sit up," said I. "I wonder whether your passion for ethnology in general would blind you to a keener interest in specific living specimens in that case."

Our stay in Calcutta had proved to me that Forsyth was far from being averse to the society of fair maidens; in fact, at one time I had serious fears lest the attractions of certain damsels might not prove more potent than that of mythical Greek relics in the heart of Asia.

"Oh, dry up, Harry. You can never get away from your innuendoes about frocks and frills, merely because when I'm in civilization I like to enjoy it."

"I didn't make any innuendoes. Your guilty conscience betrays you. Did you leave any address in Calcutta, or leave touching messages about how your thoughts would travel from far sand-buried Khotan, or how sweet certain memories would seem in forgotten Lop Nor?"

I ducked the tobacco-pouch he threw at me, and while he was looking for it resumed in a more serious vein:

"Have you ever worked out, Wrexham, how that fellow you found could have got so far across the desert without water?"

"Yes; I've thought about that a good deal. My own idea is that he must have had some with him as a start. If you remember, the old diary refers to the stream running out about a dozen miles. That would give him a start, nearly a day's march. He might have carried a load of twenty pounds — say two gallons. He carried little else, presumably a little food. Two small skins at a gallon apiece would have lasted him four days, even allowing for his being wounded. That takes him five days out — say, sixty miles. Remember, he was apparently fighting for his life.

"The question is, what did he do after that? My own theory on the point is that he was saved for a time by the rain. You may remember I said — at least I think I told you — that we had had rain on and off for a week. In the diary you remember that my great-great-uncle mentions having noticed some rock outcrops on his way back. Well, they might have hollows in them which would fill up in rain, not necessarily big ones, but things holding a few gallons, like you see in most of the hills about here. A good shower would give him another refill, and so carry him on another thirty miles or so. Probably thereafter there would be no more outcrops, and the last bit he had to do without water, and that — perhaps combined with his wound — is to my mind what finished the poor devil off. Rotten luck pegging out like that only two days short of help.

"That theory, by the way, is one of my reasons for heading a bit more south than the course steered by my great-great-

uncle. If there *are* such rock outcrops, and if we have any more rain such as we had last week, we might get an opportunity of giving the camels a bit more to drink."

"Quite a sound bit of deduction. It will be interesting to see if we find any little rock-pools or places that could be pools on the way. Well, I see the men have turned in, and I think we might do worse than follow suit. It's past nine, and we've got to be up at four and see the camels loaded and get a meal before we start."

"I think so, too," said Forsyth, getting to his feet. "Lord, aren't the stars extra gorgeous to-night? I wonder if we shall find these people use the old Greek names still?"

"Dunno about that, but I'll take a bet they still say the same kind of things to the same kind of girls out under the same stars. Human nature's the one thing that does not change much through the ages. History shows you that, all right."

"With you, Harry. It's the one unchanging factor in a very changeable world. However, what about the bed stakes?" Wrexham, a podgy figure in his *poshtin*, knocked the ashes of his pipe out against the heel of his boot and made for his bedding roll.

Ten minutes later we were all rolled up in our blankets, and Forsyth turned down the light.

CHAPTER VI

THE DESERT

AT 4 A.M. Wrexham, who has the faculty of waking at whatever time he wishes, kicked us out of our blankets and said it was time to move. Outside the tent Firoz was busy with breakfast, while Payindah and Sadiq were roping up the last bundles of kit. The moment we were outside, Payindah rolled up our valises, and then they struck and packed our eighty-pound tent.

We ate a pretty solid meal, for long travelling and campaigning had inured us to food at the small hours, and we wanted to make as long a march as possible that day, when the camels would be at their freshest. Breakfast over, the camels were brought up by Sadiq and a friend picked up in the village, who hung about our camp while we were there.

Then we set to loading the beasts, who were fairly tractable after their long marches, though, of course, in the manner of all camels, they gurgled and snarled incessantly, or blew out pink bladders from their cavernous, ill-smelling mouths while voicing their complaints. There was no trouble over the water camels; it was the miscellaneous collections such as that carried by the ammunition camel which caused us many anxious moments trying to secure the various odd-shaped packets into two compact loads. Fortunately, they were constant ones that would not have to be broken *en route* — at least, we hoped not.

By 5.30 A.M. the last camel stood up finally loaded, Firoz hurriedly attaching two hurricane-lamps and a bundle of kitchen oddments to the peak of the saddle, after the manner of the immemorial East.

It was still dark, but there was a faint, faint glimmer in the east that foreshadowed the coming dawn, and the dark velvet of the starlit sky was beginning to show a tinge of indigo

above the far horizon. Away on the outskirts of the village a mournful dog wailed his sorrows to the unheeding dark.

A final inspection of the loads by the aid of a lantern, a last look round our camp-site, and then Wrexham — unanimously appointed Caravan Bashi — gave the order to start.

The first part of our way lay along a little track fringing some fields, the last bits of cultivation on the edge of the desert. Thereafter we were to march by Wrexham's oil compass. We had reconnoitred the first five or six miles the day before, dead level going, so there was no danger of delay by unforeseen obstacles.

With Wrexham and Firoz at the head of the little string of silent-footed camels, Forsyth and Sadiq in the middle to see that no loads slipped or beasts strayed aside before dawn, and Payindah and myself bringing up the rear, we moved out along the sandy track with no sound save the monotonous tinkling of the leading camel's bell.

Sadiq's friend, after embracing Sadiq three times in Eastern fashion, stood at the edge of the camp-site to wish us luck as we went. Then he disappeared in the dark, the last fellow-being we were like to see for the next ten days at the most optimistic computation.

There was a slight check as we neared the end of the fields, from which I guessed that Wrexham was getting his bearings; then the leading camel's bell rang out again on the chill dawn air, the ghostly great beasts in front of me quickened their pace once more, and we passed out into the desert.

The full dawn saw us just emerging from the last vegetation, odd dried-up thickets and reeds, while in front lay the rolling low sand-dunes that were to be our home for some time to come. The air was cold and still, a blessing for which we were devoutly thankful. The first day we had looked out over the desert there had been a strong northeast wind, which blew great yellow sand-spouts along, blinding us from time to time. But to-day, as if for a favourable omen, hardly a breath stirred, and the blue distances were clear.

At first we passed over ground covered with fine soft dust,

here and there splashed with white and grey salt deposits that crackled under foot, and now and then small terraces of friable clay, last relics of the days when all this area was the bottom of the great inland sea. Then, after an hour or so, we got into low sand-ridges, the high-water mark of the restless ocean, which stretched before us on three sides as far as the eye could reach.

A little farther and we were well out of our depth — to continue the simile of the sea — in ridges and ridges of sand from ten to fifteen feet high, like the breakers along a coast, swelling up gently from the direction of the prevailing north-east wind, and steeper-faced — sometimes almost concave at the top — on the south and west where we approached them, for all the world like waves about to break and solidified in the process.

All day we travelled hour after plodding hour through this trackless sea of fine greyish sand. The last of the scanty vegetation had been left behind when we made our midday halt, not a blade of grass, not a tamarisk, nothing but sand, utterly void of life. The sun beat down on to the sand, and the glare was blinding, but even at midday the heat was not oppressive. We were thankful for our coloured glasses, and even the two Punjabis were glad to put on those we had brought for them, much as they had jested at the idea at first.

We covered eighteen miles that day, and camped in a little valley among the dunes, where by good fortune we found some dried-up tamarisk roots, which gave us a good fire, for the evening temperature fell fast once the sun was down, and we were glad enough to slip into our *poshtins* once more. The heat absorbed by the sand in the day radiates off at an immense pace after dusk, if one can talk about that period of the day, almost non-existent in sand countries.

After our evening meal that night, we decided — as we had previously arranged — to tell the men something about our destination. We began with the two Punjabis.

“Listen, Payindah and Firoz,” began Wrexham, “to an old tale of my father’s grandfather’s brother, who was once

in the army of John Company Bahadur. He left the army and came up here travelling, even as I have done, and he came by the same road into this very desert.

"After many days he found in its very heart high hills with snow mountains, and at the gate of the hills he found an old fort and outside that a dead man. And the dead man was white, even as I or as Lake sahib or as Forsyth sahib.

"But when he wished to enter the hills the two men with him became afraid, so that he had to return across the desert, and the water he had was finished, and first his camels and then his men died. And he himself all but died. And not wishing to tell the people here aught of his discovery until he should have searched more, he said nothing but returned to Hind, to his brother who commanded a regiment; and there he also died.

"Now, we three desire much to see these hills, for, as you know, the sahibs consider greatly the finding of strange lands and of strange peoples.

"And of these hills and of the people who must live in them because of the white man my great-grandfather's brother saw, there is nothing known either to the people living around the desert or even to the sahibs who have travelled in this part.

"But it may be that my great-grandfather's brother dreamt this thing, or it may be that he was out of his senses with fever. If so we shall have a long hard journey for nothing, and we also may come to die of thirst, even as his men did.

"Or if we get there, we may find that the people are as the Mahsuds or Wazirs of the Punjab border, and we may be attacked and perhaps slain.

"Now, all this we have told you that, before it is too late, you may yet say whether you will come with us or not. For it is not the custom of the sahibs to take men into danger unless those men be willing.

"If you consider that you would rather return to the Punjab, you shall have money and papers, and shall go back to-

morrow. But we are determined to go on and see what there is to be seen. We have said nothing to any man till now, because had it been known others might have followed, and we do not wish any one to find this land until we have seen it with our own eyes."

Without hesitation Payindah replied:

"For ten years have I followed Lake sahib, since he was a *chota* sahib in the regiment. I have fought with him in three campaigns, and do I leave his service now that he goes into a new country? If God has decreed that we be swallowed by the sands or die of thirst or perchance be slain — well, we shall, whether we go on or whether we go back."

"And so say I," chimed in Firoz. "For twelve years have I been with sahibs, and for seven years have I served Wrexham sahib, and whither he goes, there go I, too, till he casts me out. *We* are not like the men who went with his great-uncle, doubtless sons of Hindustan from Delhi or elsewhere such as were found in Jan Kampni's ¹ regiments, or perchance knaves such as the Ladakhi cook. We be Awans of the Punjab, Payindah and I, and as for there being Mahsuds or such in these hills that the sahib's great-uncle saw, *we* have spoken with Mahsuds and Wazirs — aye, with Mohmands also, and they did not talk too loudly. Do I not speak truth, Payindah?"

"Without doubt. Rememberest also certain Germani in Farance the day thy sahib got that love token on his cheek. They were bigger than Mahsuds, and we were but a few among many. But they fell down very quickly when we spoke to them with bayonets, not knowing their foul talk. And my bayonet was already broken, I recall."

"It was as thou sayest. That Germani sergeant had a stout breast-bone. Wrexham sahib says that his people thirst after seeing new lands. But, as the sahibs know, we of the Punjab are not children to play about the house-door always. We also like seeing new lands. My own grandfather went up into Tibet with a sahib not long after the Mutiny."

¹ British East India Company.

Firoz broke off his string of reminiscences. "Whither the sahibs go, thither we also come."

With Sadiq it was not quite so easy. He feared the desert not a little, but the promise of extra baksheesh finally allayed his fears. Also, the prospect of finding new places which might have treasure — the dream of so many of his folk — was perhaps alluring. Anyway, after pondering a bit, he said he would come.

Next morning we started early again, and made good progress once more, though by now the dunes were growing in height, up to twenty-five to thirty-five feet. We remarked that both to right and left they seemed higher still, but that may only have been the effect of looking out to the horizon. That day we made sixteen miles, for the higher dunes exacted their toll in the day's march, although actually the pace did not seem much slower.

On the way Wrexham looked in vain for the place where he had found the dead man. The continually shifting sand-dunes left no chance of locating any spot not marked by some definite permanent feature, such as a clump of dead trees. By now the man's bones or his mummified body were doubtless buried under the sands, perhaps to show up again centuries hence.

That night we looked out from a high dune — nearly fifty feet it must have been — over our route of next day, and saw that the dunes ahead were bigger than those we had crossed so far, and the sky, which had hitherto been cloudless, showed windy streakings to the northeast.

"Harder going to-morrow, I think," said Wrexham, pointing to the wind-clouds on the horizon.

Sure enough, next morning at dawn a strong northeast wind was blowing, and everything was smothered in sand. Our tea was full of it, our food was gritty with it, and our hair and our clothes ran sand.

The dunes were higher now; fifty to sixty feet was about the average, and still we had the impression that our route was lower than the surrounding country. We covered only

thirteen miles that day owing to the wind, the sand devils, and the heavier going and higher dunes. Our faces were masks of sand and perspiration, and we looked out with sand-reddened eyes under sand-whitened eyebrows.

That night we had to give the camels, who were showing signs of fatigue, a small water ration from our precious store. While we were watering them, Sadiq came up to suggest our turning back the next day. There could be no ruins in this wilderness of sand, he said, and there was not a vestige of a sign of any hills. But, if we would go back, he knew a man who had found really first-class ruins, and if we wanted mountains — well, there were lashings of them quite close to the trade route. Finding us obdurate, he gave up his endeavours, but I could see that he was convinced that all sanity had departed from us, and was doubtless entreating Allah to turn us back soon.

"To-morrow evening, anyway, we ought to get the first view of the snow, provided that the air clears a bit," said Wrexham, as we sat in the stuffy tent with the flies laced up, trying to eat food that was not more than one third sand.

"If there *is* any snow in the world," said Forsyth, whose eyes seemed to have suffered more than ours from the driving gritty wind. "I had an idea that the dust of Mesopotamia was the last word, but it's only toilet powder compared to this article."

He ruefully scraped the top of his *chupatti*, hoping to get below the outer layers of sand.

The following morning the wind was less, but it freshened again later. The dunes were now great billows sloping up to seventy and eighty feet, and taxed the camels severely. Still we pushed on, struggling hour after hour, through the heavy loose sand among the little spumes and fountains that danced and tossed on the brinks of the dunes where the cutting wind beat into our faces. When we halted that evening, after doing thirteen miles, the wind was perhaps a little less, but all around the horizon was veiled and grey with sand.

Next day the going was as bad — dunes up to nearly one

hundred feet in places — and the wind stronger, while about midday the father and mother of all dust-storms came on, one of the kind that makes you think it's midnight in Hades. For an hour we sat huddled up in the lee of a dune, a circle of dumb men and dumb beasts, under the biting lash of a sand-laden wind that seemed to flow past like some torrent of grit. The two Punjabis had swathed their faces in the ends of their *pagris*, and the rest of us buried ours as well as we could in the big collars of our *poshtins*.

It passed at last, but it was another hour ere we thought it was worth going on. Nine miles was all we made that day, and some of the dunes must have been over one hundred and twenty feet high.

The camels were showing clearly their weariness and lack of water, as they swayed along slowly, with lack-lustre eyes, dragging gait, and heavy breathing through distended nostrils. That night again we had to give them some more of our precious water, and it became clear that, unless we could get some definite proof of hills in front within the next thirty-six hours there could be no question of going on.

"Perhaps we shall get a fine day to-morrow," said the ever-optimistic Wrexham. "I want to see the snow the diary talks about."

"If ever I see snow or water again, I shall go and lie in them and refuse to move again till all the sand I've absorbed these last forty-eight hours is washed right out of my system," snorted Forsyth, bathing his sore eyes in half a teacupful of water.

"Well, I hope you'll see some to-morrow, though it will be a bit far off for bathing. It's still absolutely hidden by sand to-night."

Next day the wind had dropped, though a heavy dust haze still hung in the air. Like the previous day, the dunes were great high slopes, anything from eighty to one hundred feet. But the cessation of the wind made going easier, and the thinning atmosphere made us hopeful of a glimpse of the promised hills.

By the midday halt the sky was pretty clear all round, save in the one direction we wanted to see, and there, instead of our hills, was a heavy bank of cloud. Wrexham and I sat down despondently on the high dune up which we had climbed while Payindah was getting out some food, and looked out with our glasses at the distant clouds. We scanned each little bit of the bank, seeking in vain for the white glint of snow.

Suddenly Wrexham gripped my shoulder.

"Look there, Harry! Just in the middle of that dark bit like a camel's hump. Isn't that something white?"

"Which one?"

He pointed, but I couldn't make out anything.

Then he laid the telescope on it and bade me look.

I looked through the glass, and there, sure enough, just below the dark cloud showed a faint whiteness that might be cloud or might be — could it be? — the longed-for snow.

The cloud-bank was slowly changing in shape from moment to moment. The big dark cloud that Wrexham had indicated was slowly moving to one side. But the white patch seemed not to shift. Then for a fleeting instant it showed clear, a sharp point of blue-veined white that could be no cloud.

"I think you're right, John," I said as I sat up. "Look!"

He glued his eye to the telescope, gave a whoop, hurriedly fished out his compass, and laid it on the line of the telescope.

"See," he said, "bearing of fifty-six degrees. We're not far out, old man, and if that's not snow, then I've never seen it."

We shouted at the top of our voices to Forsyth below, "Snow! *Snow!* SNOW!"

He came up the slope as fast as the sand would let him, and got just a glimpse before the clouds veiled it again, a faint, tiny peak like a distant pearl in the dark mass of clouds. Then the heavy masses veiled it once more, and it disappeared from our gaze.

One more entry of the old diary was verified. We felt almost reckless now, though there must be many marches

ahead, and our fatigue fell from us like a wet blanket as we glissaded down the sand-slope among the men. The two Punjabis seemed to take it as all in the day's work. Doubtless if we expected snow ahead, there would be snow. They were of the pre-war type, with a prodigious belief in anything their sahibs said.

In a short while the wind had sprung up again, and we travelled on over the same high wind-tossed dunes of yellow grey sand. As much of the sky as was visible showed broken wisps of cloud. I remarked on this to Wrexham, and wondered whether there was any chance of rain. Such rainy season as there is in the desert was practically finished.

We were just going up the highest dune we had yet struck, a toilsome effort, when the question of rain arose. As we got to the top, Wrexham stopped and looked ahead. The wind had dropped a little once more.

"What's that?" he said, pointing; "it looks like rock."

I looked in the direction he indicated, and there, about a mile ahead, what seemed to be a low hillock of rock, dark in colour, broke the monotony of the grey landscape.

"Is rock, I think," said I. "If so, it will be a pleasant change to camping on sand."

"Seems as if we must have got on to the line the great-great-uncle followed on his way back."

"It's quaint finding an outcrop like that in the middle of the desert. I suppose it must be a peak in the buried strata that joins the hills on either side. Let's go on and see what it is."

Pushing ahead, we climbed to the top of the rocky hill, and to our amazement found a sort of rock basin perhaps three hundred yards long by fifty to sixty yards broad with jagged edges of limestone. It looked for all the world what it probably was, the top of a long ridge which had either broken through the earth at some prehistoric period, or else been gradually silted up on all sides as the sand encroached. It stood perhaps one hundred feet above the tops of the highest dunes, and on a clear day must have been a fine vantage point.

"A few hours' heavy rain would make that into a good thing in lakes," I said.

"Yes," replied Wrexham; "you can see there has been water upon occasion. Look at that thin layer of clay in the middle with the cracks in it. I vote we camp here to-night. We can't do much more to-day, and this is better than settling down in the sand. We shall be out of the worst of it at this height, and if by any chance there is rain we stand more chance of collecting some than among the sand-dunes. Not that I have much hopes, because the rainfall in these parts at this time of year is about two hundredths of an inch in the month."

The camels had halted at the foot of the hill, so we shouted down to Forsyth to bring them up, and presently we were all busy setting up camp for the night except Wrexham, who went wandering round the rocky basin. I wondered what he was doing, and when presently I saw him sitting down with a notebook I went up and asked him what he was at.

"I was just calculating the size of this hollow. It's a fine natural catchment area, as it slopes inward on every side except just the narrow south end, where it's broken away. It forms a regular sort of trough. That probably explains why it's so comparatively free of sand. The only sand that gets in is that blown up high by the wind, and then the prevailing wind sweeps it out at the south end again. If that end was blocked now and it did rain, we could catch enough water to give the camels a decent drink."

"Then let's do it," said I.

"That's just why I was figuring out the area. I make out that, if the end was blocked, this would give a yield of something like three hundred gallons from a couple of hours' decent rain. Say two hundred, allowing for what would be sucked up by cracks. It wouldn't require much of a stop at the end either, since the open part is narrow and the slope very gradual."

"Well, let's do it quick. It would make all the difference to the camels if they could get a real drink. They've done

well so far, but there's no mistake about it they're beginning to tire fast."

We got all hands on to it, and blocked up the end of the long, shallow, trough-like hill with stones mixed with loose sand. Not a very waterproof dam, but it might hold once it got wet.

Then we sat down to wait for the rain. But none came, and at last we retired to bed, uncheered even by another glimpse of the distant snow. The air was still heavy with sand, and, though the little vistas of sky that we could see among the whirling dust were covered with lead-coloured clouds, never a grateful drop fell.

That night we figured out that we should have to push on now, and trust to finding water at the end, or else turn back next day. The water — although it would have been just sufficient for men for the double journey — allowed nothing for the camels, and we had had to give them water, and realized now that they would have to be given more in future. It was three very grave-faced, unshaven men who sat discussing by the light of the hurricane-lamp.

Said Wrexham finally:

"If we start back to-morrow we've just the minimum to get us home. If we go on — assuming that we've passed the halfway line — we may just get to the hills as we finish our water. Then, if we don't find it, or if the great-great-uncle's stream has dried up — we're done, finished. Apart from water, we're chancing things a bit over the camels' grub for getting back."

He looked at us as though seeking our thoughts, and for a moment or two neither of us spoke. Then I made up my mind.

"Personally I'm for pushing on," said I; "some of the loads are getting lighter now, and, if any full-load camels show signs of creaking up, we can put the empty tanks on them. There's certainly snow ahead, and that *must* mean water, and water will mean grazing for the camels. Also, if we go back now, we've given the whole show away."

"Yes," put in Forsyth; "and next time we start everybody would know what was up. Even if the Punjabis kept their mouths shut, Sadiq would talk. That snow is not on the map, and the next explorer fellow who came along would be sure to have a shot at it. I'm in favour of our taking the chance of water and going on. Your uncle's story points to all sorts of things worth finding, and it's working out truer every day."

"Yes, most of it seems to have been substantiated now," said I. "John found a similar kind of man, we've seen the snow — unmistakable snow to my mind, though far off; and last, we've found one of the peculiar outcrops of rock he mentioned seeing on his return. There are too many coincidences about it for me to want to turn back." I turned to Wrexham. "I'm all for shoving on, John, and Alec is, too."

"Then, if you two are for pushing on, that settles it. I'd no ideas of going back myself — I think we're intended to go on; but, since we are chancing our luck badly over this water question, I thought I ought to find out your ideas first."

We turned in then, after a last lookout to see if anything could be seen of the sky. The wind was still blowing up sand, but such patches of sky as were visible seemed not quite so cloudy, and here and there a star showed through the murk.

"No luck, I'm afraid," said I, as I crawled into my valise. "However, it looks clearer, and should be better going to-morrow."

"I hope the dunes get lower. They ought to, for we must be leaving the middle of the desert now; I figure we've done over eighty miles. It was about seventy yesterday, and we did quite twelve to-day. Lord, I'm sleepy! Night, night!" Wrexham curled up into his blankets, and was asleep almost at once, and within five minutes Forsyth's heavy breathing showed that he, too, had slipped into dreamland.

Tired though I was, it was some little time before I got to sleep that night. I'm not given to pessimistic forebodings,

but I could not help wondering, as I lay awake in the dark, whether we were wise in going on. Things look so different when you think them out by yourself in the dark from what they seem in the light in company. However, I do believe in Providence very firmly, and the coincidences we had met and heard of in this quest seemed too marked for me to disbelieve. So, finally pushing my doubts firmly into the background, I fell asleep to the whistling music of the sand-laden wind outside.

CHAPTER VII

THE DISTANT HILLS

IT must have been about four in the morning that I woke, with the same sort of feeling of something being different as you have when a ship stops at night, and the absence of the engines' murmur, which kept you awake the first night or two, now wakes you up seeking the accustomed sound.

Then I realized that the wind had stopped. I unlaced the tent flies to see if the sky was cloudy or clear, but as I came out I heard a rushing sound and a gust beat on the tent as if it would tear it from its pegs. A thick whirl of sand filled the air, and the rush of it woke the others.

"What's up?" called out Wrexham as I struggled with the flies.

I explained as best I could, and while doing so smelt the unmistakable fresh smell of rain.

"By Jove, I believe it's rain coming up!" I called out, and pulled the flies apart again. The wind dropped, and was succeeded by a steady patter on the tent wall.

It got harder and harder and steadier and steadier, and we heard the men stirring.

"Come on!" called Wrexham, "all hands outside with every d——d pot and pan you can get and see if we can fill 'em."

By the light of the rain-dimmed hurricane-lamp I could see Firoz spreading out the cooking-pots, and Payindah taking advantage of the wind stopping to peg out a waterproof-sheet. Cold as it was, we stood out in the rain for the sheer pleasure of feeling the sand being washed off our faces and our skins expanding again. Our scanty water ration had allowed nothing for washing. It rained more or less continuously for nearly two hours, and stopped just as the dawn was breaking.

After it had gone on for a quarter of an hour or so, we three, with Firoz carrying our two spades and a pick, went to the far end where we had made the dam.

We already found a thin trickle of water reaching it and apparently being sucked up by the sand. But a little later the dam had bound together, and we stood there in the rain watching with delighted eyes the growth of a small black pool that spread and spread until the end of it passed out of the misty halo of light. Wrexham stayed there till dawn like a Dutchman saving a dyke, getting up at intervals with Firoz to heap more and more sand on to the outer and upper sides of his dam.

"Not bad calculations," he said, when the growing dawn revealed to us a pool of water — somewhat sandy, but still water — some thirty feet long, as much as three feet wide in places, and nearly a foot deep in the middle of the deepest pool. "I should say there was at least one hundred and fifty gallons there."

Our first care was to fill up every utensil we had, and from them, straining through several thicknesses of cloth, to replenish all the tanks. Then we gave the camels as much as they could swallow. You could almost see the poor beasts swelling as they drank. Even after that there was a certain amount left, rather sandy and muddy.

Wrexham looked at it.

"If I thought that would last the day, I would suggest stopping here till to-morrow to give the camels a rest and another drink, but what doesn't evaporate will soak through the dam, so it would be no score. We'd better use what's left for a bath."

So we did, and felt new men once more. The two Punjabis followed, but Sadiq, beyond washing his face and hands, did not appear interested. The removal of the sand crust from his face seemed quite enough ablutions in his estimation. We started rather later than usual, and, although the rain had ceased, the sky was yet heavy with clouds. The air was clear, but there was no great visibility in the horizon.

Once we left the rock where we had camped, the rain seemed to have made little difference to the sands, save that the upper surface was somewhat caked, but it was refreshing to breathe air that was air and not part sand. There was only a gentle breeze, and it was free from the irritating particles that we had been breathing for the last few days. The dunes were still very high, despite Wrexham's opinion that they ought to be getting lower. I estimated that the majority of them were little under eighty feet in height most of that day. There was a very slight steaminess in the air as the sun warmed, but as the sky cleared we began to see farther and farther.

Men and beasts alike stepped out briskly, for the down-pour had put new life into us all. As we went, we climbed each fresh dune in the hope of seeing a new glimpse of the hills in front, but for a long time saw nothing beyond the desert's yellow edge. A thick bank of cloud still hung to the northeast, although the sky above us was by now clear blue.

We halted about one o'clock, and it was after that, as the sun began to start down on his journey westward, that we were rewarded by our first view of the hills. Forsyth was the first to draw our attention to the clouds to the northeast having thinned considerably, and a little later Payindah called to me as we topped a dune. Wrexham was down in the dip in front.

"Look, sahib, those be surely hills in front!"

I looked, and there was a rift in the cloud-bank that had baffled us all day, and in it showed hills, real, unmistakable, blue-shadowed hills, such as one sees from the northern stations of India as you look out over the sunburnt expanse of plain. They were a long way off — forty or fifty miles, I estimated — although in the clean, rain-washed air they looked closer with the sun falling directly upon them. These must be the hills below the high snow we had seen.

"Surely, Payindah, hills like the hills of the Punjab."

I called to Wrexham breasting the slope ahead with the leading camels:

"Hills, John! Hills ahead!"

He stopped as I called, and then, as my words reached him, he broke into something like a run up the steep slope and stopped. Then I saw his glasses come out. I slithered down the dune I was on, and raced up to him, picking up Forsyth as I went.

The clouds were thinning even as I looked, and presently there stretched before us to right and left a long wall of hills, faint heather colour, below a long veil of clouds.

"What I had sought all day in vain, the faint lilae haze below the white that I have noted marks always the lower hills below high snow," said Wrexham, quoting from his great-great-uncle's diary. "We've found them, after all! Thank God, we didn't turn back. I think that rain must have been sent on purpose."

Wrexham is not what you would call a religious man in the strict sense of the word, but I think — and I know him well — that under his very practical and somewhat materialistic exterior is a very strong belief in a Creator who takes an active interest in His creation. But that was the first time I had ever heard him make such a definite confession of his faith, sure sign of his being deeply moved. We stood in silence a space, and up behind us climbed the camels and stopped, too. Even Sadiq was convinced now, as he stood looking out on the far hills, the first of his people to have faced the desert and seen what lay on the far side.

Forsyth was the first to break the silence.

"How far do you say they are, John?" he asked.

"Anything from forty miles upwards; impossible to tell from here. When we camp I'll plot some kind of a base-line and see if I can get an estimate. But the main point is that now we *know* we can reach them."

He led off again down the slope, and we continued the march. Owing to our late start and the high dunes, we made but ten miles that day, but we camped with joyous hearts. The cloud-cap still hung over the hills, but seemed to be thinning toward sunset.

The tent was up, and Firoz busy with the evening meal, when Wrexham, who had been taking bearings from two dunes nearly a mile apart and was now at work on a rise above us, called to Forsyth and me sitting by the tent.

"Quick, you two! The clouds are lifting, and you can see the snow."

We ran up to the top where he stood, and there, above the hills which showed sharp and clear — a long jagged wall — we could see to one side of the centre a patch of white below the clouds. A minute or two later these rolled off it, and there, stabbing the sky with two sharp-toothed peaks, was a great snow mountain vivid in the low rays of the westering sun. The last clouds lifted ere the sun went down as though to give us a full view.

The mountain rose in a long swell, not unlike a camel's back, from the centre of the wall of lower hills, and after rising gently for some way sheered up steeper in a high wall of snow topped with two great peaks with a sharp dip between. The snow-line lay considerably below the bases of the peaks, which looked like the horns on the head of some gigantic beast. Below the snow was faint blue haze that told us that the mountain was a considerable distance behind the low hills we had first seen, since these stood out clear and sharp.

"That mountain is on no map in the world," said Wrexham as he took its bearing. "You remember all this part and several hundred miles on it is empty desert even on the latest maps. We shall have the pleasure of naming a new mountain among our other finds. It's high, too — I should say twelve thousand or thirteen thousand feet, at least — to show snow at this time of year so low as that. What shall we call it?"

"I think we'd better wait till we get there. The white-skinned people have probably got a name already."

"I wonder if it will be a name redolent of old Greece," said Forsyth. "Perhaps one of the goddesses of old times. Anyway, if it hasn't, I'm for giving it something a d——d

sight more poetic than K2 or K5 or any other of the beastly insults that the Survey of India put on some of the most beautiful things in the world. Even the unpoetic Indian treats them better than that. Nanga Parbat is at least graceful."

"The lady blushes at the suggestion," I said. "Look, really blushes." The sun had just sunk below the horizon, and the great peaks ahead, still catching the rays now hidden to us, turned rose-colour, then darker red, then faded to purple, and last cold blue. A minute later they were but a white patch against the opal sky, and then they had disappeared.

"She thinks your remarks are flippant and has veiled herself, Forsyth," I continued.

"Well, what about a meal if Wrexham has done his calculations? The lower hills, too, are fading fast now."

We moved back to the tent, and while Payindah was bringing food Wrexham told us how his calculations had worked out. By his reckoning the hills should be about fifty-odd miles away: the low hills, of course, not the snow peak which was not showing when he had taken his bearings from the two ends of his base-line. The fifth day from now should, therefore, see us at the foot, reckoning on twelve miles a day average if we started early each morning.

During the next three days we did thirty-eight miles, and as we went the dunes began to get lower, and by the evening of the second day, the ninth day of our march, were not more than thirty feet high. The desert was ever the same, greyish sand-dunes, now wind-tossed once more, for the wind had risen again, though not with the same violence that had marked the earlier days of our journey.

On the evening of the ninth day the snow peak had sunk much lower, from which we were the more convinced that it lay some way behind the long wall of rock which now filled all our northeast horizon. Wrexham measured it again, and made us out twenty-three miles from the near hills, somewhat more than his last estimate had been, taken at much

over double the distance. The snow mountain he considered at least fifty miles beyond the first hills.

On the eleventh day we did a good march, covering thirteen miles, thanks to much lower dunes. Not bad going for the camels, who were very done by now from want of grazing and water. In the afternoon we remarked some distance away to our right another bit of rock formation, and Forsyth was for making for it. He said it must be the line that was mentioned in the diary. Wrexham at first considered it would be better to stick to our original bearing which had done us so well. Then, since going was now easy and the rock formation not more than a couple of miles off our line, we decided to head for it. It added a little to the march, but nothing noticeable. As we got near, we could see that the hill was somewhat higher and longer than the last, as, indeed, one would expect, it being nearer to the main chain. It must have been one hundred and sixty to one hundred and seventy feet above the surrounding sand.

As we got closer, Forsyth and I pushed on ahead, climbing up it some way in front of the rest, and, to our surprise, as we neared the top, a couple of birds flew up. This first sign of life after eleven days of barren, lifeless desert was a pleasant find, and made us feel that we had surmounted the first lap of our difficulties, and that, whatever lay before us, at least we were in habitable country once more.

This formation differed from the last in being a razor-back all along with no central depression. Clearly we should have to camp at the foot of it. But it would give us a fine view of the hills from which to plan the morrow's march.

But our greatest surprise was when Forsyth climbed to the crest line and then shouted to me:

"Water below, Harry; real water!"

I hurried after him, and he pointed out to me a thin shining line about half a mile away, a little ribbon of silver in the glaring sands, a ribbon that seemed to lead away toward the hills, which now, only about ten miles distant, towered up like a giant wall, steep and apparently unscaleable. The

previous evening Wrexham had estimated their height at not less than two thousand feet. From here they looked, as, indeed, they proved to be in many places, even more, and as far as one could see sheer cliffs of scarped rocks, with only a short expanse of tumbled slope at their feet. They gave one the impression of springing straight out of the desert sands.

"That must be the great-great-uncle's little stream, and somewhere at the end of it should be his valley," said Forsyth, as he sat down and lit a cigarette, a form of luxury that was drawing near its close. "This gives one almost an aeroplane view, doesn't it? Can you see any signs of life yonder — fields or houses or anything?"

I had got out my glasses on reaching the top, and while he was speaking was studying the distant hills, but could see nothing whatever that looked like signs of human habitation.

"Can't see any. It looks all as barren as the Aden coast, and not unlike it with these rocks springing clear out of the sand. Toss you who goes down and sends John up here and then leads the camels round to the stream."

"Right-o!" Forsyth pulled a coin out of his pocket and spun it.

"Heads," I called.

"Heads it is. What am I to do?"

"Go down and send John up. Tell him about the stream, and then lead the camels round to it below where we are now. The south side will be the shortest way."

Before he got to the bottom of the slope, he met Wrexham starting up, explained the lie of the land, and then led the camels off while John joined me on top.

"Your uncle's stream unless I'm a Dutchman," I said, pointing. "We can camp by water to-night, thank goodness."

Wrexham looked down without speaking. Then he turned to me. "Considering we marched on a guesswork bearing calculated from a vague entry in a hundred-year-old diary, it's unfair to call it chance."

"Yes, I don't think there's much chance about it. Not that there really is about anything, for that matter, to my way of thinking."

Sometimes, especially when things go crooked, one feels that it's all chance, that the only controlling hand is one vast mocking deity or fate; but, generally, if you look back afterwards, you see that there's been method in it all through, although at the time there seemed to be none unless it were malevolent. After all, we are but shuttles, and as we drive our way through the loom there doesn't seem much sense in the whole thing, the steady monotony, over and under, over and under. But later, when perhaps we're laid on the rack for a space and can see the pattern as a whole, we realize how the apparently aimless movements each had their part to play in the finished pattern of beauty that the weaver had intended.

As we were speaking, the first of the gaunt, weary camels came round the corner of the hill below us, and we watched them pacing slowly along till they came to the bank of the stream, then stopped and buried their muzzles in the water.

"Nice to camp by running water again. I wonder where it goes to," I said.

"Swallowed up in the sand, I fancy, before very far," said Wrexham. "Can you see if there is any valley at the far end in the hills?"

"I was looking for that as you came up, but I can't see any break. If there is one, it must be very narrow. But you remember, according to the diary, it is narrow, and I doubt if you could see it from here unless there was a big dip in the cliffs."

"There's a long line of shadow that looks as if it might be something, but, as you say, it's hard to make out from here. One thing is pretty clear, that the people, if there are people, can't live below the hills. I can't make out a single vestige of a field or even a tree, and the hills themselves look absolutely bare."

"Probably such vegetation as there is on this first ridge is

on the other side. You see that very markedly sometimes in hills. One side quite bare and the other all green," said I.

"Well, anyway, here we are at the entrance or somewhere near it, and the next thing is how are we going to get in?"

"We'd better push on to-morrow morning and get up to the cliffs, and then start looking round for the valley with the gateway. There's nothing to be seen from here, so our best course is to follow straight up the stream to wherever it runs into the hills. You remember your great-great-uncle travelled nearly three days skirting them before he found a way in at all."

"True. Our best course will certainly be the stream. And now we'd better get down to camp and look over things for to-morrow. There's no more need for the compass, anyway. I'm jolly tired of marching on it all day." Wrexham led away down the rock slope, and I followed.

After dinner we sat outside and listened to the pleasant ripple of the little stream in the starry stillness. The wind had dropped entirely and the air was clear, so that we could see the sharp outline of the hills against the sky.

"To-morrow we shall know our fate, more or less," said Wrexham, "as to whether we can get into these hills peacefully or not. But I think we ought to be prepared for possible trouble, so a couple of us had better work ahead. There's no difficulty about keeping our direction, since all we've got to do is to follow the stream. What do you think, Harry? You're the professional soldier man."

"Quite agree. I think, if I and Payindah keep half a mile or so ahead and you keep the two camels well closed up, we shall get warning in time of any one moving in front. We're all armed except Sadiq, and he's safer without anything."

"If we start at 7.30 A.M. we shall be in the hills before mid-day, and that will give us plenty of time to look around before dark if this is not the actual stream we're looking for, though I feel sure it must be. A longer rest will do us all good to-night; don't you think so?"

"Every time, John. I shall be d——d glad to feel that

I needn't stir out of bed before six to-morrow, and when I do, that I can get a decent wash for once in a way. I'm contemplating shaving, too." Forsyth rubbed his hand over his stubby chin, and then we all remembered our peculiarly dirty appearance, and then and there decided to commence the morrow with a shave, hitherto abandoned owing to lack of water.

"I don't want to enter the promised land of the Gobi Greeks, or whoever they may be, with ten days' stubble on my face," continued Forsyth, who had some consideration for his personal appearance.

"No; you might meet the Lady Euphrosine at the door," said Wrexham. "I hope you've got a string of nice classical compliments ready at the tip of your tongue."

"Well, if you haven't it's not my fault after all the trouble I've taken with you for the last nine months."

It was true. We had both taken considerable pains with Wrexham day after day trying to push Greek into him, and I must say we had succeeded passably well in that he could now make shift to read the language easily. We had brought up a pocket edition of the more famous classics and one or two modern books with us, and every day during our long journey from India he had spent an hour or two, and sometimes a great deal more, in study. Conversation was, of course, his weak point, although Forsyth and I had endeavoured to make him talk to us in a combination of modern idioms and old classical Greek.

"We shall look pretty silly if they don't talk Greek or if they've got some special brand of their own," said Wrexham.

"Well, if they do talk it, it's sure to be different after all the centuries they must have been here. Consider American after a mere hundred years and a bit. But the basis will probably be unchanged, and pronunciation and idiom can be picked up pretty quickly when you're actually among the people. Besides, if they've been cut off from the rest of the world, they will have been saved from new importations from other tongues, so that the only changes will be definite

alterations of old forms. Some find to take back home for the philologists. I can see myself writing a treatise on phonetic changes through the ages in a pure tongue."

It was strange how Forsyth spoke as though we knew the people in those hills would speak Greek. And yet he only voiced all our thoughts. We had long ago ceased to think there was any doubt in the matter, and only wondered what sort of a reception we should get and what manner of life we should find them leading. We speculated a good deal on that point, but none of us had any very clear theories. Forsyth favoured some kind of city-state, such as he was familiar with from his readings of the classics. Wrexham, on the other hand, I think, expected to find a mixture of Arabian Nights Bagdad with a prehistoric Pathan village. I had no very clear-cut ideas on the point at all.

"I'll tell the men we don't start till 7.30 to-morrow," said Wrexham, "and then I vote for bed. We may as well get a good sleep, for Heaven alone knows whether we shall get one to-morrow night."

He went over to the men's fire, for we found a certain amount of reeds by the stream brink, and the men had taken the opportunity to make up a fire — a comforting thing to sit over, after the miserable oil-stove which was all we had had for cooking during our desert journey.

We turned in a few minutes later, and my last recollection of that night is of Wrexham gravely asking Forsyth whether the ancient Greeks understood the "Kamerad" gesture.

CHAPTER VIII

THE GATE

"LOOK, sahib, the hills open in front like a Waziristan *tangi*," said Payindah, pointing.

It was getting on for midday, and we had nearly reached the wall of hills, which now towered, grim and threatening, above us, a long line of sheer cliff, incredibly high; and, though the face was scarred and furrowed, there seemed to be no place where it could be ascended except in true mountaineering fashion with ropes and other aids.

Nor was there any sign of life in all the expanse of bare brown rock that rose before us, not even a wheeling kite in the sky. If life there were ahead, it must lie all on the other side of this great barrier that stretched away on either hand as far as we could see, merging from dead lifeless brown to warmer reds and madders and purples, and then finally to hazy blues as the distance softened the hard outlines.

We two were standing on the edge of the sand looking up a short slope of rock, tumbled with big boulders and smaller stones that ended abruptly at the foot of the wall-like cliff. Some half a mile or more behind us our string of camels plodded slowly along over the low sand ripples, here only a foot or two in height.

The whole scene rather reminded me of the Derajat — the plain that lies between the Indus and Waziristan — save that the hills here were far more formidable. Behind us, the expanse of yellow sand, not unlike the sun-dried soil below the frontier hills. In front, those frowning walls of rock, and just ahead of me in the white sunlight, Payindah with his short *poshtin*, his loose tied khaki *pagri* round his bobbed black locks, his baggy khaki breeches and worn *chaplis*, for all the world like any tribal levy man of the Indian border, save that his rifle, even now after the long march, was spot-

less, and his bandolier had been new-cleaned overnight. Evidently Payindah, like Forsyth, believed in first impressions.

Ahead of us, as he said, the little stream — now somewhat wider — ran into the rock wall in a narrow cleft, where it vanished.

"Wouldst like to picket the top?" I asked, pointing up.

"Wah, what could get up that save a fly?" said he; and, indeed, I think he was about right. It was not often that Payindah admitted that anything was out of his power, for he possessed to the full that boastfulness so characteristic of the Punjabi, a relic, perhaps, of the old Greek strain from Alexander's time that the Punjab talks of even to this day.

Travel along the Punjab frontier, yes, and right down into Baluchistan, and any old ruin, any disused water-channel faced with big stone blocks, any uncommon feature that might be the work of men, and local fable will tell you that it was built by the great Sikandar.

"Well, let us push on to the mouth, and then, if we see naught, we will halt the camels here," said I.

We went on forward right up to the mouth of the cleft — a narrow sword-cut such as one meets all along the Indian frontier, but narrower than most, perhaps a bare thirty feet from rock wall to rock wall, with the babbling stream running in the stony bed between.

But the height of it was more than any *tangi* I had ever seen, comparable only to a Doré picture. On either hand the walls of bare rock shot up straight, hundreds of feet above us, striated lime rock, splintered and cracked and twisted, but offering neither foothold nor handhold for any but the boldest and most experienced climber equipped with every aid. At the foot were little whitened rock plants, and clumps of coarse grass.

A couple of hundred yards farther on and we could see the valley turning, but when we reached the turn, lo! another again in front. And a silence that was eerie, naught save the

murmur of the water, here perhaps three or four feet wide and a foot or more deep in places, running fairly fast.

We went back to the entrance, and, seeing the camels just approaching, signalled to Wrexham to stop.

"Here we are, and I think the thing is to halt now and make camp. Afterwards, we can explore the valley. If it's your great-great-uncle's one, it runs in about three miles according to the diary. It'll probably take nearly an hour going up and as much coming back, and say an hour pottering round, and by that time there'll not be much point in going on. So we might as well stop now, and look for a camp. There are some overhanging rocks there that would give a certain amount of shelter from the wind if it gets up. In this sort of place one often gets howling gales, and a bit of shelter is welcome. What do you think?"

"Yes; I never thought we should get beyond the foot of the hills to-day," said Wrexham. "I'm with you in the matter of getting a camp-site before we start exploring. There doesn't seem to be much grazing here for the camels, worse luck."

"There's a little scrub stuff inside at the foot of the cliffs, but I think we'd be wise not to let the animals touch it to-day. Remember your old uncle's beasts. The stuff may be poisonous. It seems a new kind to me. Payindah will stop in the valley entrance and do sentry while the rest of us fix up camp."

Another hour saw us settled in, the camels unloaded, and our little tent snuggled under the lee of a big rock. We made a hasty lunch, and then, leaving the men to set up things, we three started up the valley, rifles very much at the alert. As we entered the *tangi* mouth, Wrexham, who had been thoughtful during lunch, turned round to Forsyth and me just behind.

"Look here, you fellows, I've been thinking about what we ought to do when we get to the far end if we find the gate my great-great-uncle wrote about.

"It's not exactly a suburban villa where you can walk

straight up and ring the bell. The people who live here are presumably not accustomed to strangers, and they might be nasty. One is not at one's best standing outside a fort gate trying to induce the people inside — who may not even know any language we speak — to let us in. My idea is that, if this *is* the valley, and if we come across that stone gate, we should hang about a bit under cover and see if anything materializes."

"I was thinking of that, too," put in Forsyth. "We've plenty of water now, and so there's no immediate hurry, though the camels could do with some grazing. I'm all for trying to get to know the inhabitants somewhere out in the open. From the diary the place sounded what you might call average inhospitable, and I should prefer to try my Greek on some bloke out in the open rather than have to shout it at a narrow loophole with the tip of a three-foot arrow wavering about just inside."

"We all seem wonderfully unanimous in our thoughts," said I; "the same thing occurred to me as we were starting. I suggest, further, we don't even show ourselves at first. Let's see if they materialize before we sound a tucket, or whatever the mediæval wanderer used to do when he struck a strange fortress and observed the occupants getting handy with the boiling lead in case they didn't like his face."

So we decided — and, as it turned out, it was well that we did so — to reconnoitre as carefully as if the inhabitants were Huns and we a bashful trench crawling party, and, if we found the gateway, not to go out of cover until we saw some chance of meeting the owners on more even terms.

As we went on, Forsyth remarked on the fact that the valley was getting still narrower. We had gone about a mile, and it was now not much above fifteen or sixteen feet wide. The bottom was of rounded stones and pebbles, obviously water-worn, but whether the whole valley was due to water action it was hard to say. It must have taken æons and æons for the stream to cut down those many hundred feet, unless at some time it contained a far greater flow of water than existed now.

Wrexham opined that originally it must have been a fault in the rock, and pointed out that the strata here were tilted up vertically on edge. He said that probably the valley we walked in had once been a layer of very soft rock — easily decomposed — between two harder ones, and that when the rocks had been tilted up the gradual percolation of water had started a groove, and then the stream had done the rest.

The walls were of a grey-green limestone here, though at the entrance the general tinge had been brown. There was practically no vegetation save for here and there, just at the foot, blanched shrubs and small plants of the type common in rock country over middle Asia. Just now the sun was nearly overhead, and some stray sunbeams filtered down, but for the greater part of the day the valley must have been — indeed, we soon found out that it was — shrouded in a grey gloom. By the time we had gone another mile, the walls had closed in to barely ten feet apart.

“I wouldn’t like to be caught in a spate here,” said I. “The place would be a seething torrent fifty or sixty feet deep in a few minutes if there was a heavy fall beyond. It rather makes me think of the Narrows on the Wana road from Jandola, only on a bigger scale.”

“Never been up there,” said Wrexham; “but, if you birds had to fight in stuff like this last year, I’m glad I wasn’t there. One thing here is that it’s so high above that, short of heaving over rocks blindly, the other side couldn’t get at you at all if you had command of the end. If the inhabitants are unpleasing, we could manage to hold them up in this pretty easily with rifles, and if we couldn’t get in, at least they won’t be able to get out at us. What a topping entrance for a real mediæval fortress!”

“Or even for a modern one. You couldn’t get guns up the cliff anywhere near here, and so you’d have to fight through this in pure primitive fashion; and if, as it must, it opens out in front, all they’ve got to do is to stick a few men with rifles, or even with bows, a little way beyond under cover to prevent you ever getting out at all.”

We were just rounding a turn as we spoke, Forsyth leading. We heard him exclaim suddenly, and then, coming round the corner, saw him standing staring at the rock walls.

"Well, I'm d——d!" was all he said.

It took us a second to realize about what he was exclaiming. The stream split into two branches, and twenty yards farther on these two branches disappeared into tunnels in the rock, low, square tunnels, perhaps three feet high by two broad, obviously the work of man, cut foursquare out of the solid limestone.

"Now I wonder what they did that for?" said Wrexham. "It doesn't look as if these were springs. It seems rather as if somewhere higher up they had deliberately diverted the water."

We studied the little tunnels, but there was nothing to show who had made them. Unornamented, they might have been of any date. Just plain tunnelling through the rock much as you can see in Northern India to-day, where the tribesmen tunnel along in the river-banks to lead water off to fields lower down, up above the natural water-level of the stream.

In front the valley continued its sinuous course, but dry now. We followed for about one hundred yards, and then Wrexham stopped and sniffed. He has a keen nose.

"Something dead about these parts," he said at last.

There was just a faint movement of air, and undoubtedly, as Wrexham said, it was bringing down to us odours that evoked other scenes back in the war years. Two minutes later, rounding another bend, we were aware of brighter light in front.

"Steady," said I; "I think we've come to the end. Stop here a minute while I look ahead."

Another fifty yards round a still sharper and narrower bend, and then I drew back quickly into the shadow of the valley, which had suddenly widened, and was partly filled with some masses of fallen rock. I drew in my breath as I looked, and then, stepping back, waved up the others, sig-

nalling silence as I did so. When they came up, I motioned them behind the rocks and pointed. As they craned their heads cautiously up, I heard Wrexham give a low whistle of surprise.

For there, straight in front, was the open clearing and the rock gate, cut into the solid face of the cliff just as the old diary described it. And on the white stones of the clearing were bones, in large numbers — gaunt ribs and rounded skulls — and a pervading smell of death. While, most ominous of all, in the centre of the clearing a huddle of draggle-winged vultures jostled and flapped and writhed their foul necks about something hidden beneath them.

We crouched there, staring breathlessly across the clearing at the gate on the far side.

Imagine a sheer rock wall just like the cleft we had come up, but rock of a darker colour, that surrounded with the same unscaleable sides the little open space, about two hundred yards in diameter, at whose edge we were hidden in the valley mouth. On the far side of it, and facing us, the rock had been carved for some hundred feet across and sixty feet up into the semblance of a fort gateway.

There was the big central gate, with its massive pillars and great lintel carved after the fashion of a huge beam. Under this two great stone doors, embossed with stone spikes and square heads of nails in stone. On either side a small gate with similar stone-fashioned doors, each a single leaf, and on these again — worked in stone — the replicas of iron bar and spike and nail.

The big gate and the two small side doors were again all three enclosed in a frame fashioned like the projection of a fort, rounded towers on either side and crenelated bastions above. And in these bastions were long arrow-slips — real, these seemed, though showing dead black shadows.

On the long stone block that ran under the bastions were carvings of twisted serpents, whose heads met in a fan in the centre, above which was the full-rayed sun. This last, I think, had been gilded at some time, for it was brown and

discoloured in places, as if at some earlier date it had been covered with colour, though now no trace of it remained.

Below that, and just above the main entrance, was lettering, standing up clear from the background.

"Can you read that?" I whispered as Forsyth focused his glasses.

"Too far," he whispered back. "Pass me the telescope."

We had brought the telescope along with us luckily.

I passed it to him, and he undid the strap, fitted in the high-power eye-piece, and slid it into position with as much care as though stalking a markhor. He studied it a minute, and then turned to us. "*Greek*, and it's more like the old Greek than what's on the picture, though not quite the same," he said. "It runs like this: 'To those to north, the gate of life; but to those to south, the gate of death.'"

"It seems to be that, all right," whispered back Wrexham; "this is the south side of the gate, and there are plenty of poor devils who have looked their last on life the last time they looked up at the arrow-slits. There's a man there under the birds — foul beasts — or rather it *was* a man some time ago. They pulled his foot up just now while I was watching through my glasses. He's not new."

"Wish I could smoke," muttered Forsyth; "not safe now, I suppose. This is foul!"

"Guess I know now why they diverted the water," said Wrexham. "The stream probably comes down on the far side of that gateway, and they diverted it to keep the entrance clear. Any one seen any movement in front?"

"Not a sign," said Forsyth. "I've been putting my telescope on the loopholes. I should say they were real, not fakes like the rest of the carving."

We lay there for perhaps three quarters of an hour watching, but never a sign of life in the gateway. At last I said to Wrexham, "Well, what's the next move?"

He turned over and slid back down the rock.

"'When in doubt put out pickets.' Isn't that what your frontier experts say? We must have some one always here

in case any one appears. One of us three with one of the men. I propose that we do three shifts during the day, say six to ten, ten to two, and two to six. They may not use this place often; depends on the number of people they have to kill off, and we don't want to miss a chance of seeing what sort of creatures they are. It's after two o'clock now, and, if you two will stay here, I'll scuttle back and get one of the men and then come and relieve you for the evening watch. Then to-night we can talk over the future."

"What's the programme if anything turns up?" asked Forsyth.

"Question of discretion, I think. Have a good look, and if they're peaceful you might venture conversation. If not, don't, but at least we shall know something about what they're like. I'll be as quick as I can." And, picking up his rifle, Wrexham trotted off down the valley.

"Well, of all the d——d family graveyards I've ever struck," said Forsyth as we settled down to our watch. "I wonder if it is a graveyard, by the way, in spite of Wrexham's theory about killing people. We may have found the back entry into a sort of Parsi Tower of Silence place, where they put their dead because earth and fire are sacred elements and mustn't be contaminated by corpses."

"By Jove! I never thought of that," I answered. "It might very well be that, after all. One can imagine this is rather like what the inside of one of those places on Malabar Hill would be, for instance. Only, if the diary is true, it knocks the cemetery theory out of count. And everything in it has panned out so far."

"Yes, that's so. Old Wrexham would have found a nicely laid out corpse and not a fellow with his hands tied and an arrow in him. Phew! When I come on a job like this again, I'm going to bring a gas-mask."

It must have been nearly four o'clock when Wrexham, accompanied by Payindah, came up behind us. The latter grimaced a bit as he took up post.

"This is like Farance again, sahib," he whispered to me.

Evidently Wrexham had told him that it was sentry duty in the front line, and that he was not to make a noise.

We left them there, and went back down the valley to camp. Wrexham said he would come back as soon as it was dark.

On arrival in the camp, we found Firoz had some tea ready for us, and after that we checked through some of our stores, took photos of the *tangi* entrance, and did various odd jobs of overhauling.

We also got out the twelve-bore, an old hammer-gun of mine. I thought if Sadiq was to take a hand in the lookout work he had better be armed, but it was no good giving him a .303 rifle. But he did know enough about a hammer-gun to work it, and there are worse things than a twelve-bore with buckshot at close quarters. I dropped a charging panther once with that same old gun and a charge of buckshot, and it stopped him as no high-velocity rifle would ever have done.

It was dark by six, and we expected to see Wrexham by seven. But he did not come, and about eight o'clock we began to get anxious, and Forsyth suggested going up the valley to look for him. I counselled waiting a bit, as I did not see how he could well come to grief. He had Payindah with him, and both were armed, and nobody could get into the valley except at each end; of that I was sure. And I was equally sure that no one could get in at the far end with two shots like Wrexham and Payindah waiting for them.

But when half-past eight had gone and there was no signs of them, I began to agree with Forsyth. We had just started into the *tangi* when we heard footsteps ahead on the stones, and Wrexham and Payindah loomed up out of the gloom.

"What happened to you?" I said, as we turned back toward the tent. "It's been dark for hours."

"I know; that's why I wanted the evening watch. I've been doing trench crawls quite in the old style with Payindah as covering party."

"What on earth for?"

"Wanted to see what was on the far side of the clearing by the gates. Shout for food; I must go and wash first. I feel like a cemetery at present."

He put down his rifle, and now, by the light of the lanterns, I saw that he had what looked like a thin bundle of sticks.

"What have you got there?" I asked.

"Show you after dinner," was all he vouchsafed, as he made for the stream with a towel and a piece of soap.

During dinner he expanded. Nothing had happened during his watch, but the moment it got dark he left Payindah in position, and crept off in the gloom across the clearing. He has no nerves has Wrexham. I should have wanted very good reasons to take me out among that tangle of smelly bones. The first thing he had made for was the corpse we had seen. With the darkness the vultures had left it.

"I crawled up to him first. I was right this afternoon when I said he wasn't new. He wasn't by a long chalk. But in the faint light I could see that he had had no clothes, and also that his hands were tied. I expected that, because I've got a great respect for my great-great-uncle's accuracy after all we've found. What I was looking for was the arrow, which was a messy job to get away. But I did it, and it's there. There were two in this bloke as a matter of fact, but one was broken. I suppose he pitched on it as he fell.

"I did a circular tour after that, and found nothing much except bones, or what you might call 'nearly' bones. Once I caught my hand in something that I thought was string, and then realized that it was hair, long hair. They're not only man's bones there, unless some of them wear long hair like Baluchis or Sikhs, which I should think unlikely. I also picked up another arrow or two.

"It was practically pitch-dark now, but I headed for the gateway. I crawled up to it d——d quietly, and got right up against the central door. They're real gates, all right. I pushed my knife its whole length into the crack between the two bits of the centre one.

"I glued my ear to the cracks, and listened for quite a long time, but nothing stirred inside, so far as I could hear.

"I tried the little doors after that, but they seemed to slide in the rock and fitted jolly tightly. They're real, all right, too.

"The big one hasn't been opened for a long time, I fancy, because the crack was packed with sand and grit. The grooves round the little ones, on the other hand, seem fairly clear.

"On my way back I stubbed my toe on another arrow sticking up in the ground, and brought that along, too. There's no other entrance except the gate and the valley mouth where we stopped. It's smooth rock wall all round like the sides of a well.

"After a last look in case we might see a glimmer of light in the loopholes, we came back. I've got the arrows tied up there. Pass 'em over, Alec."

He spread them out on the top of the *yakhdan*¹ that served us as a table. "I cleaned 'em up a bit on the way down. Look, just as the diary said, there is writing on them." He pointed to the stem below the draggled feathers. "What do you make of it?"

"They're not the same, anyway. And they're very indistinct. Here, put the light nearer," said I.

"One thing, they've all got the same coloured shafts. See, they're all black."

"This one's different," said Forsyth. "Look, there's a red ring round under the feathers."

"Well, what's the writing?" queried Wrexham.

"I've got mine," said I. "It's 'Freedom.'"

"And I've got mine, too, now," said Forsyth. "It runs 'A little time.' What on earth does that mean?"

"The Lord only knows," said Wrexham. "Why on earth any one should want to paint things like that on an arrow beats me. Look at this one. It's rather obliterated, an oldish one, I should say. But isn't that 'to-morrow'?"

¹ Mule trunk.

"It is," said Forsyth. "They're a queer crowd with their mottoed arrows. Any one see a glimmering of sense in them? Let me see the other two." He looked at them. "Duplicates. See; there's another 'Freedom' one, and this is again, 'A little time.' Well, I give it up."

We did, too.

"Anything else?" I asked Wrexham.

He shook his head. "Nothing else I could see. It was practically dark in there, just a faint glimmer of moon which hardly did anything except make the darkness darker. Well, now, about to-morrow. Whatever happens, we'll stop here for a day or two. In the first place, we want to know if there's anything to be seen, and in the second, we must give the camels a rest. I propose we watch in turns during the day. I'll take first shift with Sadiq, then Forsyth and Firoz can relieve us. That'll let Firoz get breakfast, and also be back in time to get evening food. You, Harry, with Payindah, can relieve Alec and Firoz. That suit every one?"

We both agreed that it would do.

"I think," I said, "that we ought to have a sentry all night. You say you've seen nothing, but there may be people moving at night, though it's not likely. Still, it's best to prepare for the worst, even while firmly expecting the best. If we each do a two-hour shift, it won't come very heavy."

The others agreed it might be sound, so we arranged that we three and the two sepoys should do two hours each at the entrance to the *tangi*. Wrexham went on first, followed by Firoz, who was relieved by Forsyth. Payindah took over from him, and I had the dawn watch. However, nothing happened all night, and none of us heard a sound.

Shortly after the first dawn, Wrexham and Sadiq started up the *tangi*, and I went back to my blankets for another hour's sleep, feeling very chilled, for the dawn air was biting. About half-past nine, after we had had breakfast, Forsyth and Firoz started off, and an hour and a half later Wrexham and Sadiq, who looked rather as if he had been seeing ghosts, came back with nothing whatever to report.

At a quarter-past one, I turned out Payindah, and the two of us went off to relieve Forsyth and Firoz at the mouth of the clearing. All was just as it had been the day before. The same heavy smell, the same litter of bones, the same filthy vultures, the same frowning, lifeless gateway in front.

"Cheerio," said Forsyth as he went off. "Hope you'll enjoy the family vault as much as I have. I've taken some photos, and I don't believe any one ever comes here except, perhaps, once a month or so."

Payindah and I settled down to our monotonous watch, and nothing moved before us save the obscene birds.

CHAPTER IX

A LADY JOINS US

PAYINDAH took first shift, while I settled myself into a corner of the rock below him with a pocket edition of Browning, which I generally carry when travelling. It is an old friend that has solaced many a lonely hour and many a lonely place.

I had been reading for about three quarters of an hour — I remember the poem was "One Word More" — when Payindah gave a low hiss. I looked up and saw he had turned his head round.

"There's some one in the gate," he said.

I slipped the book into my pocket, climbed up beside him, and stared out across the open space, but saw nothing.

"Where?" I asked.

"Something moved in the third loophole. There it is again! Look!"

I gazed through the glasses, and then just caught a faint flicker. It might have been anything — a man's hand, a flutter of cloth; but something certainly moved in the shadow of the arrow-slit. We crouched there silently for perhaps ten minutes, and nothing more happened. Then suddenly Payindah spoke, and I saw his rifle slip forward.

"Sahib, the gate opens; the little one on the right there."

I looked, and, as he said, there was a growing shadow as if it was being opened slowly. Then the chink widened, the gate opened, and two figures stumbled out.

I say "stumbled," for they gave me the impression of being pushed out. The gate swung to behind them noiselessly.

The leading figure was that of an old man with long white beard and white locks. His arms were bound behind his back, and he moved slowly, walking rather oddly, as though something dragged at his feet. But the second figure was that of

a woman, young and white, with a mass of auburn hair. She, too, had her hands bound behind her.

The old man tripped, and I saw the girl all but fall. Then they moved forward a few slow paces and stopped.

Then again onward, and now I realized, as I watched through my glasses, why they stumbled. Their movement seemed constrained, and it was only as they came over a little rise that I grasped the fact that they were shackled together, left ankle to right.

I heard Payindah's guttural grunt behind me.

"Who be these swine that maltreat an old man and a woman like that, turning them out of the gates stripped and bound?"

A few more yards and the old man halted, looking dazedly up at the sky. Then he moved forward once more, the girl stepping jerkily at his side. Again he checked and swayed, and then I saw the girl bend toward him and evidently say something. I think she was urging him to another effort. Poor soul; I suppose they thought they might yet escape.

They had come slowly and hesitatingly perhaps sixty yards, and I was racking my brain as to some means of helping them, when suddenly the old man stopped dead, then shot forward on to his face, pulling the girl to the ground. I could see him as he lay; he only moved once, and up from between his shoulders stuck a long arrow-shaft.

What happened after that will take a long time to tell, though it took but a few minutes to act.

The girl writhed herself up again, and bent piteously over the old man. Then she dragged herself to her knees, and stayed looking at the gate.

At first I had hesitated. One did not want to introduce one's self to a new country by attacking the local police in the execution of their legitimate — if unpleasant — duties. But the sight of the girl decided me. This could be no decent form of justice.

I laid my rifle down by Payindah and said:

"Shoot into the loopholes. Shoot like hell!"

As his rifle spoke, I was slipping off the rock, and a second later I was out in the open, my big hunting-knife in my hand, running as I hadn't run since I played outside left for my regiment before the war.

Payindah was not much in the brain line as far as education went. But even before the war, when straight shooting was the common possession of most regular soldiers, he stood out as a marksman. And his star specialty was rapid shooting. I have seen him put thirteen shots into a two-foot target at two hundred yards in thirty seconds, and do it often.

As I ran over the stones, picking my way among the scattered heaps of what had once been men, I heard the steady rapid crack of his rifle behind me, and before me I could catch the "smack" "smack" of the bullets about the arrow-slits.

The men inside were evidently not accustomed to firearms, and the sudden noise — magnified by the enclosed space, and, as we learnt later, the effect of the shots that went home — paralyzed them.

Probably another factor in saving us was my utterly unexpected appearance in that place of death, where no living being, save captives stripped and bound, had ever been seen before. Possibly, for a minute or two, they — a superstitious, half-savage people — took me for an evil spirit.

Anyway, not a single arrow was fired at me as I tore across the clearing.

The girl, hearing the noise behind, turned her head bewilderedly, and then, seeing me leaping over the stones, struggled to her feet. I don't know what she took me for, but with the knife bare in my hand she probably thought me Death in some new form. But she stood there bravely facing me with steady eyes, her poor arms cruelly twisted behind her back, her red-gold hair falling in a loose bundle on one shoulder, her breath coming quickly between her parted lips.

I hadn't breath to speak nor time to waste, and I didn't definitely know what her language was, so I did the only possible thing. I put my arm round her and swung her to the

ground as gently, but as quickly as I could, so that she would be the smaller target while I got her free.

I think she expected to feel the knife in her heart, and was amazed to be still alive. Anyway, she lay still, which was all I asked. I didn't worry about her arms; what I wanted to see was her leg. And then to my horror I found that instead of a rope as I had hoped, she was fastened to the old man by a short length of chain riveted in each case to an iron ring round the ankle.

I think I put up some kind of incoherent prayer, and then bethought me of my pistol. I squatted with both feet on the chain, pulled out the big Colt forty-five automatic, pushed it up hard against the riveted boss on the ring round the old man's ankle, and pressed the trigger. Did I mention, by the way, that the old man was stone dead with two inches of the arrow sticking through his ribs over the heart? His being dead helped me, since I had not to worry where the bullet went.

The recoil nearly dislocated my wrist, but I saw that the rivet had smashed away, and with a violent wrench I pulled the chain free.

My hasty glance at the girl's arm, smothered in many times knotted rope, had shown me that it would be quicker to carry her than try to free the knots in the green hide that bound her arms together. To have tried to make her run over the stones with her arms literally racked back, and a length of chain dangling from one ankle, would have been equally slow; she would have fallen time and again.

I put my left arm round her shoulders, my right under her knees, swung her up, and started at a slow jog-trot over the stones toward Payindah, and then an arrow flicked past us, to stand quivering in the ground beyond.

By this time doubtless the people inside had sized up me and my mission, and between the rifle-cracks I heard shouting in the gate. I had gone a matter of thirty yards when the girl said something I didn't understand, but obviously to attract my attention backwards. Her head was resting on my left shoulder, so that she could just see over it.

I looked back. There was the little gate open and five men running over the stones after us, men in steel caps and short leather and mail jerkins.

I thought that was the end. I struggled on twenty paces or so and then stopped, slipped my arm from under the girl's knees so that she could stand, and with my left arm round her shoulders turned, drawing my pistol as I did, and covering her body as best I could with my own.

The leading man, a sinister, dark-visaged fellow, was within twenty yards of me, a short heavy sword in his hand. Practically level with him was another man. Ten yards behind them was a third, and beyond that again two more, all running fast, with guttural shouts, while two or three more showed in the open gate.

As I turned I saw one of the hindmost pair stop, sink slowly to his knees, and then roll over sideways. Payindah had caught him, all right. I asked him afterwards why he picked the last man, and found that we had been between him and the leading man, and he dared not shoot at them for fear of hitting us.

The leaders were within ten yards as I fired. The heavy bullet took the first low in the middle of the body, and he smashed down in a heap, his steel cap ringing over the stones nearly to our feet. His feet drummed a second on the ground, and then he lay still — face buried in a huddle of bones, one of his earlier victims. The girl gave a little gasp as he went over. The second man had leaped in at the same moment, and was barely three yards from me when my second shot caught him in the chest, and he flung forward at my feet. He tried to struggle up, but sank again, blood pouring from mouth and nose.

Seeing his leaders drop, the third man, checked at this new fashion of killing, turned his head to see if he was supported, missed the fifth man, and as he looked saw the fourth pitch backwards with a ringing crash of metal, and then turned to fly. I fired, but missed him, and he made for the gate.

I thrust the pistol back into its holster, swung the girl up

again, and made off once more. And as we started, out of the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of the last fellow shooting forward on to his face, roll over, wriggle up on his hands again trying to claw his way forward, struggling and screaming like a wounded rabbit. I think Payindah must have broken his spine low down. From what I learnt of him and his kind afterwards, I'm glad he took some little time to die.

Then Payindah turned on to the gate, and within fifteen seconds that was shut again hurriedly. I expect the bullets ricocheting round corners into the passage behind, as arrows could never have done, was pretty scaring to the men inside, leaving out the sudden incomprehensible deaths of the party in the open.

But his switching off the loopholes gave the men above a chance. Probably some bold spirit had rallied them after their first surprise, and as we started off the second time two arrows shot by, just missing us; then two more, one of which went through the skirt of my coat.

So far I had not had much time to consider the girl, but I glanced down at her as the arrows came over, and tried to get her head below the level of my shoulder. She was quite conscious, and cooler than most people would have been in her circumstances; and yet as I stumbled along over the stones she must have been suffering agonies, with her arms bound so tight that her shoulder-joints seemed to stick clean out of her body. There was no colour in her drawn face, and there were dark shadows below her big hazel-grey eyes. But she lay there in my arms with never a moan.

Then I caught my foot in some snag and nearly fell. Something tore across my face, and I heard the girl give a little faint cry. An arrow had flicked in between us as I stumbled and, tearing open my cheek, had grazed a couple of inches below her right shoulder. But she didn't scream, just looked down at the wound and up at me again.

I must have been a fairly unpleasing sight by that time, panting for breath, with the blood streaming down from my face on to her white neck and shoulders.

But Payindah had got back on to the arrow-slits, I think. Two last arrows flicked past, one passably near, the other a good bit overhead. There were only thirty yards to go now, and it was done at a stumbling walk. Thank goodness, no more arrows came, and then I got round the corner of the rock, where Payindah's rifle — the sweetest music I have ever heard — cracked steadily above me, and, I am ashamed to say, slid forward on to my knees, nearly pitching on my face altogether. Luckily I saved myself. Then I laid the girl down, mopped the blood off my face with my sleeve, and fumbled for my knife.

As I was getting the knife out, I called to Payindah to ask if he wanted aid.

"No need, sahib. These spawn of hell have shut the gate, and now they dare not even shoot from the loopholes. Three lie dead in the open, and two more are dying noisily near them." He fired a burst of rapid shots, and then, stopping, hurriedly slipped off his *poshtin* and pushed it down to me, saying as he took up his rifle again, "The memsahib will be cold."

Payindah, like most decent fighting men, is a gentleman of nature.

So I turned again to the girl, who was sitting up, and with a somewhat unsteady hand hacked and tore at the twisted leather that bound her arms. The man who had tied her up was an artist and also a fiend. She told me later that he was the third man who followed us, the one whose back Payindah had broken. It took me with a sharp knife about three minutes to get her arms loose.

The swine had wound the raw hides into a sort of criss-cross network, and pulled it up so that her arms practically met from the wrists to the elbows behind her back. Her nails were blue, and her hands all swollen up with great knotted veins standing out. She was a good plucked 'un not to scream while I tried to get her free. When I'd cut the last of the knots and peeled off the ropes which had sunk into weals in the flesh, though luckily not breaking the skin, her arms fell limp and helpless to her sides.

With my handkerchief I wiped the blood off her shoulder and then tied it up. There was only a small tear an inch or so long, and not deep.

Then I pulled Payindah's *poshtin* on to her, and settling her against a rock tried to massage her arms. Once the blood started moving, she nearly fainted, and I could see the pain was pretty bad. Luckily I had the little brandy-flask I always carry, so I poured some out and held it to her lips.

She made rather a grimace, coughed, and choked, but swallowed it, and a little spot of colour came into her cheeks. After a few more minutes she was able to move her arms and just bend her elbows a bit.

We had brought a thermos of hot tea for use during our watch, as it was very cold in the gloomy valley, so I reached that down and gave her some, which she swallowed gratefully enough. Payindah was only firing occasional shots now, and said there was no movement to be seen at the arrow-slits.

While rubbing the girl's arms, I tried to talk to her. I said a word or two in Greek; then I tried my halting Turki, then Greek again. The second time she seemed to recognize something, and said slowly, in unmistakable Greek, though idiom and accent were strange at first: "Who are you? You are not of those of the gate?"

"Friends, lady," said I; "friends from a far country. You are safe now."

Then the pain stopped her speaking more, and she closed her eyes and leant back against the rock.

Five minutes later, she was just beginning to bend her wrists and the swollen veins were going down, but I could see how the efforts hurt her.

I stood up and spoke to Payindah.

"Can you hold this place alone, Payindah? It's the narrowest place to stop any one. If you can, I will take the mem-sahib back and send up the others to relieve you. We shall have to get away from here now that we've killed these men."

"Wah, sahib, one shot like me could hold this against an

army. Have no fear. They have no guns, and, so long as it's light, nothing will cross the stones alive while I am here. But what when it gets dark?"

I looked at my watch — just on 3.15.

"The others will be here before dark. Stay you here and hold the valley." I took off my bandolier and passed it up to him. "I will leave my rifle in case yours should jam at any time."

I helped the girl to her feet. "You will have to walk now. It's too far to carry you. Can you walk if I help?"

"I will try," she said.

Then I took off my puttees and made slings for her arms, so that the blood flowing down should not hurt too much as she walked. The last thing I did was to knot up some of the cut leather rope, twist it into the chain fastened to her ankle, and tie it up in a loop to the skirt of Payindah's *poshtin* which came down to her knees.

As I was doing this last, Payindah looked down. "The mem cannot walk over the stones with bare feet," and he loosed his *chaplis* and dropped them down to me.

They were a bit large, but most Easterns have smaller hands and feet than we have, and I managed to knot them on to the girl's feet fairly well with the aid of the lanyard of my knife. Then I put my arm about her, and we started slowly down the valley.

When we came to the stream, I made her sit down, and bathed her hands and arms, washed the cut on her shoulder, and tied it up again. Then I washed as much of the blood off my face and neck as I could — I was still bleeding a bit — and made a crude bandage with a second handkerchief I had in my pocket.

The girl tried to help me with this last, but her swollen hands still refused to do anything, and with a gesture of despair she gave it up. "I cannot use my hands," she said piteously. Then, looking at my face, "Are you much hurt?"

"Nothing really," I said; "keep your arms still now for a while."

We went fairly slowly, and it took us an hour to get to the tent. I didn't try to talk to her much, for I could see that her arms hurt a lot as we walked over the rough stones.

"My God!" said Forsyth, whom we ran into just at the *tangi* mouth examining plants. "What on earth have you been doing? And who have you got here?"

Then he shouted to Wrexham to get the medicine-chest out quick.

"Had a fight, killed some unpleasing gentlemen, picked up this lady, and left Payindah with two rifles holding the valley."

By this time the others had run up to us, and Wrexham had brought the medicine-chest, so I said to Forsyth:

"Tackle her first, arrow gash on right shoulder, and arms all to hell from ropes. Talks strange Greek slowly."

He gathered up the medicine-chest and piloted the girl to the tent. While he was overhauling her and dressing the cut on her shoulder, I turned to Wrexham and hurriedly explained things.

"Right-o," he said, "I'll cut along now and join Payindah. Two men can hold that pass all night. As soon as Firoz has put some food out — the girl looks as if some wouldn't hurt her — send him along and Alec, too, as soon as he's done with you both. You'd better sit down and keep quiet a bit; you look a trifle war-worn. Have you talked to the damsel yet?"

As he spoke he was pulling open the ammunition-boxes, from one of which he took out a small square tin and from another a little round cylinder.

"Yes. She talks Greek, all right, though it sounds funny. But I didn't worry her much; she was looking pretty cheap. What's that you're digging out?"

"A few pounds of powder and some lighters that I brought. With that and some string I'll rig up some booby-traps in case we have to come away in a hurry." He opened his little tool-chest and pulled out a hacksaw. "That'll get the chain off the girl's ankle. Put a pad underneath while you work."

"Good idea. I'll do it when Forsyth's done with her. Do you think we shall have to bolt from here?"

"I fancy so, but I don't want to go till we've found out something from the girl. She will be able to tell us what's going on inside. Nor do I want to trek by night if we can hold on till morning and then slip away quietly. They'll be shy of trying to cross the open space in daylight if they think we're still there."

He stuffed his treasures into a big haversack, slung two bandoliers round his neck (we had loaded our sporting .303 into clips and packed it into bandoliers), filled my empty thermos from the teapot on the table, got his rifle, and started off, saying as he went:

"Get all the loads roped up in case we have to scuttle quick."

I went over to the tent, where I found Forsyth had fixed up the girl in one of our beds, dressed her shoulder, fitted her out with a suit of his silk pyjamas (he is particular about his underclothing), and was rubbing her arms with something or other. She could move her fingers by now, and the swelling had gone down a lot. They were carrying on a conversation, both speaking rather slowly.

As I came in, she looked up, and seeing me caught hold of my hand with a torrent of words rather too quick for me to follow exactly with her strange accent, but it was mostly thanking me for getting her away from the gate. Feeling distinctly embarrassed, I murmured something about "nothing to make a fuss over."

"Are you feeling better now?" I asked.

"Yes, much better already."

"You've got some luck, old man," said Forsyth, "to get a chance of rescuing a girl like this. Jolly nice-looking and lots of pluck. She must have been through hell, but no whining."

He had a final look at her arms and then pulled the blankets up over them.

"What about her shoulder?" I asked.

"Oh, only a deep scratch, and there's nothing else the

matter. Her arms will be all right to-morrow. We must get the chain off her leg, though."

I showed him the hacksaw.

"Good! Can you tackle that job now while I get some food for her?"

"Yes. But I shall want you to hold the ring steady while I saw it. We want something under it, too; a towel will do."

He reached for a towel he had been using, and the girl, who had been listening to us, asked me if he was going to do my face.

"Presently," said I. "But first of all we're going to get that ring off your leg. Then we'll give you some food and something warm to drink. After that you must try and tell us what happened to you and where you live. Now keep your leg still. We shan't hurt."

Forsyth turned back the end of the blanket and wrapped a twisted towel round her ankle, pushing it up under the ring. Then he held the ring steady, and I got to work. The iron was soft, and the hacksaw went through it with no trouble. A bit of a wrench at the cut ends and it pulled open enough to let me slip her ankle — a particularly slim neat one — through it.

"Well, now I'll get her some food. I've told Firoz to bring boiling water, and I've got a bottle of bovril here. The rest will have to be *chupattis* and tinned stuff. We're not exactly equipped for hospital feeding." Forsyth went out and shouted for Firoz.

"You must try and eat, even if you're not feeling hungry," said I. "We may have to go a long way to-morrow, I expect."

"Where are you going?" she asked, looking at me anxiously.

"Try and take you back to your own folk, if we can find a way in, or if you can show us one."

She was clearly relieved at this, I could see.

"But don't worry about that for a bit. Here's food

coming. When you've eaten and feel stronger, we'll talk about it."

Forsyth reappeared, carrying our cherished bazaar tea-tray, with some food on it, and, propping the girl up on the pillows, proceeded to feed her. She tried to take the cup herself, but her wrists were still too stiff, and he had to help her. When she had finished, there was a little more colour in her cheeks.

"Pass me those brushes," said Forsyth.

I passed them over, and he brushed out her hair, and made it into two plaits in a notably skilful manner, I thought.

"He's a good nurse; isn't he?" said I.

She smiled wanly at him.

"Hasn't she topping hair?" he said. "Real Titian red. Reminds me of some one I used to know."

Every pretty girl reminds Forsyth of some one he used to know. I suppose that's why he escaped unmarried. There's a certain safety in numbers.

When he had finished, the girl said that it was time my face was done.

"Just going to now. You rest a little and then we'll come back." He smoothed out the blankets and slipped another pillow under her head.

"Now come along outside, Harry, and let's have a look at that face of yours." He picked up the medicine-chest as he spoke, and I followed him out of the tent, where he called Firoz for a basin of water. Then, pulling off my extemporized bandage, he cleaned up my face, which was getting moderately painful.

"A fairly big gash, Harry. You'll wear your face in a sling for some days to come. Now hold steady. I'm going to hurt a bit."

He did.

"There, that's done," he said at last, reaching for a roll of lint. "It'll stop hurting presently; it's a fairly clean cut, though deep. They keep their arrows sharp, which is a blessing. That cut the girl's got might have been done with

a razor." He was twisting a bandage round my head as he spoke.

"Well, now, we'd better go and ask the girl what's been happening," I said, as he finished and began putting his things away.

"Yes. But first I'll tell Firoz to get ready. I'll tell him to pack up some food for Wrexham and Payindah; they'll want something up there. The gorge must be perishing cold by now. It's none too warm even at midday."

When we had given Firoz his instructions, we went back to the tent, and sat down on Wrexham's bedding next to the girl, who had been put into mine. She was looking better already from the food and the warmth.

"Now will you tell us one or two things about what's happened?" I said. "Are the people in the gate people you're at war with, or who are they?"

"They are Shamans, a tribe who live round the gate. They are not yet at war with us, though my father expects war some day. They captured me when I was stopping with an old chief, who is a friend of my father's, just outside our country."

I was getting accustomed to her accent now, and she had the sense not to talk too fast.

"Why did they capture you, then?"

"They and certain others attacked the old chief's house when I was there. He was the old man with me in the gate." She shuddered a bit.

"Then why were they going to kill you?"

"They weren't — just yet. But . . . the chief Shaman . . . wanted me . . . and so I thought I'd better make him angry — as angry as I could — so that he would kill me quick. They say once he is angry, nothing but blood pleases him, so I thought that was my only chance."

The colour had gone from her face again, and she breathed rather quickly, so I turned on to something else.

"Do you think the Shamans" — I hesitated over the word, and she repeated it — "the Shamans will attack us to-night?"

"I do not think they will dare face your weapons that kill with only a noise. Moreover, I think they are afraid of the outside of the gate by night. They say there are devils there. Last night they kept me above the gate to frighten me. But I thought that there were worse devils inside than out. . . . Also they will not know what you are. No man has ever come into the country for hundreds of years, and I think that the common people do not even believe there are men outside." She looked at us, and then went on again: "You are certainly men, and of course I know there are other countries. But how came you across the desert, and why? And who are you?"

"We came from very far away, lady. We came because we heard that there were white people like ourselves here, and we wished to see. But we will tell you all about that later on. Now you just said the old man with you was a friend of your father's. Who is your father?"

"He is chief of the Blue Sakae, as we call our clan."

"Are there several clans in the country, then?"

"Yes, four; but the Shamans have overcome three of them, and seek now to overcome us, being very, very evil."

"Are your people far away from here?" I asked.

"About three days' journey — on horseback — to the east."

"Is there any way up the cliffs into your country, or any other gate like this one?"

"There is no gate." She thought a little; then continued: "Have you ropes?"

"Yes; we have ropes which we brought to help us climb the cliffs if we could not enter the gate."

"Then if you can climb well — very well — I can show you a way that might be climbed. It leads to some caves near a country house we have on the edge of our country."

"Then to-morrow, lady, we will start for there and take you back to your people. At least, we will if you can show us a way up the cliffs."

I turned to Forsyth.

"Well, now we know where we are, and the thing is to get hold of John. I suggest that we move east the first thing in the morning, unless he's seen anything which makes him think we ought to go to-night."

I turned to the girl.

"Now you lie still and rest, and, if you can, sleep. We are going to get things ready to start to-morrow. Presently we'll come back and fix you up for the night."

"I wonder if John has seen anything," said I as we left the tent. "The girl does not seem to think that the enemy will come out to-night, and I expect they're pretty well scared, what with our guns and our unexpected appearance in a place where no one ever comes. Thank goodness, the moon gets up soon. It will give some light in that beastly place if the enemy try to come out. I'll go up with Firoz and tell John about things."

"No, you won't; not much. You'll just sit quiet here and rest that face of yours. I'll go along with Firoz as soon as I've made up some stuff to send that young woman to sleep. She's had enough shocks to last her a lifetime, and I want her to get to sleep. When I've gone — say, in another half an hour — give her this stuff I'm going to make up; it ought to send her off pretty quick."

He was opening the medicine-chest as he talked, and proceeded to mix up some drugs.

"Did you notice the way she talked?" he continued. "I'm sure Greek is not her mother tongue. You noticed how strange words slipped in every now and then, and when she saw we didn't understand them she substituted Greek ones, sometimes thinking a second or two. She's got her wits about her, all right, that young person."

"Yes; I noticed that. Her Greek is different from any I've heard, although one can follow it easily enough. I wonder if it's the old classic Greek just been changing through the ages, or whether it's some old forgotten dialect. But did you realize her clan name, the 'Sakae'? I've met them somewhere in one of the classics, I'm sure."

"Yes; I remarked that, all right. They were a tribe of sorts in middle Asia in Alexander's time. The chief points about them were their being very stout fighters, and their women being particularly independent. There's some old story about their marriage customs, including a decision in each case as to whether the man or the woman should rule the house. Rather fits in with the present case, for it's clear that this damsel is accustomed to treat with men on an equal footing. None of your Eastern *purdah* about her."

"Jolly refreshing to meet after some years in the East, isn't it? I wonder if this crowd are the original Sakae? Were they supposed to be white?" I asked.

"I fancy so. At least, the old writers differentiate between them and the Indians, whom Arrian refers to as being 'blacker than any other men except the Æthiopians.' If the Sakae were dark, they'd have mentioned it. But this girl is as white as you or me, and you'd remark on her fairness even in England. I wonder who they can be. Not pure Greek, I'm sure, if they're all like her."

He handed me the stuff he had made up, closed his case, and called to Firoz, who came up with his rifle slung over his shoulder, Payindah's *chaplis* and *poshtin*, our second thermos and a bundle, presumably food. Forsyth got his rifle, slung on a bandolier, and the two set off. I set Sadiq to roping up the loads, so as to be ready to move quickly if necessary, and then I went into the tent.

The girl was still awake so I lit the lantern which I had brought, for it was getting dark. Her colour had come back a lot now, and I realized more than I had before how really beautiful she must be when she was well.

"Are you warm enough?" I asked. The evenings were getting chilly, and a cold wind had sprung up.

"Yes; quite warm now, thank you."

"Well, anyway, I'll put this rug over your feet, so that you can pull it up later if you feel cold."

I took the rug off Wrexham's bedding and spread it over the end of her bed. Then I began to pull out the two other bedding-rolls.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Taking our bedding outside," said I.

"Whose bed have I got?" she asked.

"Mine, as a matter of fact. Why?"

"And what are you going to do? You won't have enough things if you give me all these."

"Yes, we shall. One of us, if not two, will be up in the valley watching all night in case the Shamans try to come out of the gate. They won't get far if they do, though," I added to reassure her.

Then I tidied up the tent, and finally brought her Forsyth's medicine.

"The doctor sent you this to make you sleep. He says you're to go to sleep now."

She drank it without a murmur.

"Is the tall fair man a doctor?"

"Yes," said I.

"And what are you?"

"A soldier. At least I have been one for many years."

"I thought so," she said reflectively.

"And why?"

"Because you look as if you made people do what they're told quickly without asking questions. Many soldiers look like that. My cousins do."

"Are they soldiers?"

"Yes. But most of our people are soldiers to begin with until they're old enough to take over their father's land."

"Well, you go to sleep now. You're quite safe here, so don't worry. One or other of us will be sleeping just outside the tent, so you can call if you want anything, and I'll leave the light burning."

Her eyes were bright, and she looked, as Forsyth said, as if sleep was the only thing for her after what she'd been through.

"How can I call if I don't know your names?" she said.

"Mine's Harry Lake, and the doctor's is Forsyth."

She didn't worry much about the latter name, but mine

seemed to give a little difficulty, for she repeated it two or three times, finally compromising on 'Harilek.' And 'Harilek' I remained ever afterwards.

I was just going to turn down the light when she asked — woman-like — in a *very* anxious voice —

"O Harilek! What about some clothes for to-morrow?"

I admit I hadn't thought about that matter. How on earth were three wandering bachelors going to fit out a young woman — of remarkably pleasing looks I thought again as I looked at her — from our exiguous male wardrobes?

"We'll find something for you, all right," I said, in my most reassuring tones. "But . . . we haven't got any skirts," I added.

She laughed then — a real laugh — the first I'd heard from her, and thought it a good sign that she was getting back her spirits.

"I didn't think you would have, Harilek. You're not the sort of people that would have skirts with you."

"You seem to understand very quickly just what sort of people we are," I said, rather nettled as I turned the light half down.

"*You* are not at all difficult to understand — soldier man — at least not to a woman, though doubtless you think your soldiers can't read your mind."

"Time you went to sleep, lady. By the way, you haven't told me your name yet."

"Aryenis," ¹ she said, snuggling down on my worn pillow.

"Sleep well, Aryenis; you're quite safe now, so don't dream."

She closed her eyes. Then she opened them again, looked at me, and said very slowly:

"Good-night, Harilek; good-night . . . and thank you."

I felt I'd had my reward as I went out and softly pulled to the tent flies.

I pottered about watching Sadiq rope up loads, lending him a hand with the more difficult ones. Then I made him

¹ Pronounced Er-yennis.

refill the last tank, inspected the others, went over the loads — nearly everything except our sleeping kit and the tent was roped up — and finally, realizing that I was very weary, rolled into Wrexham's bedding, and lay out in the stillness watching the moon rising over the desert to the east of the shadowy hills.

I suppose it was nearly three hours later that I heard footsteps on the stones, and got up to find Firoz coming back with a note from Wrexham:

No movement in front, but saw lights in arrow-slits at dusk, so sent some shots over and lights went out.

A bit jumpy till the moon got high, and fired precautionary shots at intervals. After the moon was up did another crawl to see the fellows you laid out. A villainous-looking crowd. Three dead, one just on it, and the fifth won't last long. Couldn't pull the old man over to our side owing to the noise, or might have buried him decently.

Alec will come back later. He told me what the girl said, and we will trek at dawn, hugging the cliffs eastward. A. will give you further details.

Payindah full of blood and battle. Wants to know who the "mem" is?
J. W.

I explained things to Firoz, and went up to the tent door and peeped in. The girl was asleep, her eyes closed, and her breathing slow and regular. Evidently Forsyth's medicine was working all right.

Then, feeling thoroughly tired, I told Firoz to keep awake, curled up in Wrexham's bedding again, and in a few minutes, despite a very tender face, was asleep. A somewhat broken sleep it was, full of dreams about arrows and savage men, sometimes my mail-jacketed friends of the afternoon, sometimes older souvenirs; and in the midst of them all a vision, big hazel-grey eyes, a very kissable kind of mouth, and a cloud of red-gold hair over white shoulders. Then once a picture of all that with a slim white body waiting bravely for death, and lastly, a sweet, low voice saying, "Good-night, Harilek; good-night . . . and thank you." I had no more dreams after that.

CHAPTER X

BELOW THE CLIFFS

It was past four o'clock when Forsyth woke me up, and I rolled out of my blankets into the cold dawn. The wind had dropped now, however.

"Time to turn out, old thing," he said. "We've got to be under way by six. How's the face?"

"A bit sore," said I, as I tightened up my *chaplis*. "Where's John?"

"Still sitting up at the end of the pass. He's not coming back. We're to pack up and start off to the east. He and Payindah will stay there till it's light, and then come away following us as rear-guard. Nothing happened all the time I was there. But old Wrexham's a hard nut. Wish I had half his nerve. He went crawling among the bones nearly up to the gate to look-see."

Firoz was setting out cups and plates on the *yakhdans* by the light of a hurricane-lamp. In the moonlight I could see the camels kneeling down and Sadiq carrying up loads. Evidently Forsyth had been busy since he came back.

"First thing is to get some clothes for the lady," he continued. "You're the nearest size; I'm too long and John's too fat. What can you raise? That pair of grey flannel trousers you keep for state occasions and your other shooting-coat will do as a start."

"I've got a Jaeger sweater, too, and a pair of old tennis-shoes."

"Good, and I've got my one and only silk shirt. Don't suppose she'll want to wear your sweater next to her skin. Thank goodness, I've got a lot of safety-pins in my outfit. That's the chief essential as far as women go. Well, if you help Sadiq, I'll go and wake her up; I'm glad she got to sleep. I was afraid she might break down if she didn't."

Ten minutes later, he returned chuckling to where I was helping Sadiq rope things on to the camels.

"D——d lucky you have a fellow with you who's been brought up by a crowd of sisters. I wonder what the wretched girl would have done if she'd been handed over to the tender mercies of you and John."

Considering the trouble I'd taken to collect the lady, and the fact that I have a perfectly good sister myself, I thought the taunt was unmerited. So I merely asked:

"Whose sisters?" whereupon Forsyth answered in quite a peeved way that he meant his own.

By a quarter to five, we had everything loaded up save the food *yakhdans*, the tent, and my valise, which Aryenis was using. We cast anxious eyes on the tent as time went on, but it was just on five when she emerged and came over to us, rather shyly, I thought. I got up (Forsyth, seeing her coming, had gone to get Sadiq to strike the tent) and said good-morning, inquiring after her shoulder and arms.

"My arms are all right now, and my shoulder's not hurting much," she said, and asked after my face.

Being a woman, she had done a lot with the miscellaneous outfit, mostly mine, which Forsyth had presented to her. I noticed that, as he prophesied, the silk shirt *was* inside the sweater, and, being a mere man, wished it was the other way about. You see, the sweater was mine.

I felt sorry for her having to make her appearance like this, with my baggy grey trousers tucked into a pair of very old stockings ending in my tennis-shoes, about four sizes too big. She had swathed her hair in a big silk handkerchief, rather moth-eaten, but an old treasure which had outlasted me many *dhobis*.

I made her put on my *poshtin*, which came right down to her feet, and I think she was glad of the warmth. Then I offered her Wrexham's valise to sit on, and sat down on one of the *yakhdans*. She looked a great deal better than the night before, though still a bit worn. I expect she was feeling the strain of all she'd been through.

Firoz appeared with a teapot, some *chupattis*, and a dish of salmon, the kind that grows in tins. As he put them down, he greeted Aryenis with, "Salaam, Miss Sahib. *Ab achhe hain?*" It was noticeable the way the men treated her from the very beginning as a person of consequence. I explained that he was asking if she was feeling better, and she smiled at him and thanked him in Greek. Doubtless Payindah had told him how brave she had been, and they were both her very devoted slaves ever afterwards.

I poured out some tea and helped her to some fish. I noticed that knife and spoon were familiar enough, but that the fork rather defeated her, and could see that she was watching carefully to see what I did with mine.

"Did you sleep last night, Harilek? You must have been cold out in the wind."

"Pretty well, thanks. And you?"

"More than well, as I ought to have, since you have given me your tent and all your things. And this morning when the doctor brought me the clothes, he gave me the most wonderful mirror I have ever seen. I thought I was looking at a real person, not a mirror, when I looked in it. It was like the glass round the lamp, but I've never seen glass that you can see through before. Ours is thick and coloured, and we only make plates and beads of it."

"What do you do for mirrors, then?"

"Metal. I've got two of bronze, but they are not nearly as good as your glass ones. Yours must be a wonderful country if three men travelling on a journey in the desert have all sorts of things like that with them."

"Yes, I expect our things must seem strange to you, having been cut off from the big world so long."

"What am I eating, Harilek? This pink stuff?"

"That's a fish of our country."

"But you said your country was ever so far away! How could you bring fish with you?"

"Oh, we seal it up in boxes, and it keeps for months and years. It tastes all right, doesn't it?"

"Quite. But how very wonderful."

"Not half as wonderful as finding some one like you here, just like our own people."

"Am I like your women?"

"Yes, only nicer-looking than most."

"Nice compliments, Harilek, considering the things I'm wearing. *I* know what I look like to-day. If you wanted to make pretty speeches, you shouldn't have let the doctor give me the mirror. But I mean are your women fair like me? And what sort of clothes do they wear?"

"Don't ask me. All sorts."

"I see. Not trousers like these things, I hope!"

"No; not trousers like those. Skirts. I hope *you* don't wear trousers — like that."

She gave a sniff of disgust.

"No, Harilek! *Skirts*. Nice short ones."

Having loaded the tent, Forsyth came over, made a hurried breakfast, looked at his watch, and said:

"We'd better finish packing up. It's twenty-five past five, and I told John we'd get away by six."

"What's left to pack?" I asked.

"Only the mess things, but that'll take a quarter of an hour, at least. Hi, Firoz!"

"Look here, we'd better take a hand at washing up these things. We don't want to pack 'em up all dirty," said I. "I'll just dip 'em in the stream."

Forsyth had turned Aryenis off the valise and was roping it up. Seeing me with my hands full of plates going to the stream, thirty yards away, she gathered up the remaining cups and saucers and followed. I was on my knees by the stream when she arrived, evidently anxious to help. She said something about that being woman's work, from which I imagine she thought I might be doing something more useful. However, we finished the job together, and, coming back with the lot washed up, packed them into the *yakhdans*. Then we roped on the last loads, and cast a final glance over everything.

Firoz brought up the spare camel and made it kneel down. You remember it had a riding-saddle on. The grunts and gurgles and the long, writhing neck and open mouth rather frightened Aryenis, who drew back a pace. She was evidently not familiar with camels, for she had been looking at them curiously before. At last she asked me what beasts they were.

"Camels," I said. "Have you none in your country?" I had to say the word several times in different forms before she understood it.

"Camels. Yes, I have read of them in old books. No, we have none."

I was just going to make the camel get up, having settled her as comfortably as I could in the saddle, when Forsyth told me to mount.

"You'd better ride as well, Harry," he said. "You can see better aloft, and it'll be company for the lady. It may also be less painful for your face than stumbling along over the stones."

As that camel had carried nothing for its keep for the last fortnight, I was very ready. Besides, it would give me a chance of talking a bit more to Aryenis. Since she was, so to speak, the captive of my bow and spear, or rather of my pistol and my particular slave's rifle, I did not see why Forsyth should do the talking. So I swung myself into the front seat, made her hold on tight, and pulled the camel to its feet.

The coming dawn had lightened the sky, and everything showed ghostly in the faint mixture of moonlight and dawn. I looked at my watch. It was five minutes past six.

"All aboard," I called to Forsyth.

"Right-o. All ready. Lead straight along, hugging the cliffs."

The camel stepped out; behind me the big black leader's bell tinkled, and looking back I saw the long line of swaying necks, with Firoz with his slung rifle and Sadiq trailing the shot-gun on foot beside them. Forsyth was evidently at the tail.

We crossed the *tangi* mouth, and passed on beyond under the frowning cliffs. Aryenis looked up the gorge with a little shiver as we passed. She must have been glad to see the last of it.

The going was not bad at the foot of the slope on the edge of the sand. Above us towered the cliffs, gaunt, bare rock, grey in the light of the growing dawn, and on our right was the trackless ocean of rippled sand with the dunes growing in height toward the horizon. The sky was colourless, and the stars, already faint in the moonlight, were rapidly paling before the coming sun, hidden from us as yet by the giant wall above. But the western sky flung back a faint reflection of the coming glory, and soon the western edge of the desert grew golden as the sun swung up and the mountains' shadow shortened eastward toward us.

"The dawn is very beautiful, Harilek," said Aryenis, pointing to the translucent sky and the golden light on the desert's fringe. "I never thought to look on it again yesterday. Think you you will be able to get me back home all right?" There was an anxious note in her voice.

"I hope so, Aryenis. But you've got to show us the way. Still, I don't think we should have found you if we weren't going to get you home. Some day I'll tell you how we came here. To my mind it's all too wonderful to be nothing but chance. I think it must have been meant. No, I think we shall get you home all right to the people who are waiting for you; your father and — who else?"

A sudden thought had struck me, a most unpleasing one. I'm not more sentimental than the average Englishman is underneath his veneer, but, after all, I had taken some trouble over Aryenis, and the idea of having salved some one else's property was naturally unattractive. Besides, every moment seemed to show her as a person exceptionally worth taking trouble over. I had expected to find — if we did find white folk — something half-barbaric, and here was a distinctly cultured and exceptionally attractive girl.

"There's my brother Stephnos and old Uncle Paulos and heaps more people. I've got lots of friends."

I breathed a distinct sigh of relief. I didn't mind taking trouble about salving people's daughters or sisters or mere friends.

"Oh, Harilek. You said you thought you were meant to find me. What did you mean? Who meant it?"

"Who meant it? Why, who could mean a thing like that except one person? God, of course."

"Did you say God or the gods?"

"God. We only believe in one. How many do you believe in?"

"We only believe in one, although some of our people believe in many, a thing that brings strife sometimes. My father says part of the Shamans' enmity comes from this, since they believe in many very evil gods."

This was a bit of a surprise. I had hardly expected to find monotheists in this country. It was fairly clear that these people were some old prehistoric survival of the original white races, and could hardly have received Mohammedanism. Anyway, Aryenis's independence showed clearly that the tents of Islam had not reached her country when they had swamped the greater part of Central Asia.

"But, Harilek, you say you only believe in one. How is He called?" She seemed very interested.

"Just God. But if you can understand, we also believe that He had a son Christ, who came into the world in the guise of a man —"

"But," she said excitedly, "then you are Christians even as we are!"

I could hardly believe my ears. It is true that there are scattered Nestorian Christians in Chinese Turkestan, but how on earth could these isolated people be Christians! I turned round to Aryenis in bewilderment.

"You seem surprised."

"So are you, Aryenis."

"Well, it is *rather* wonderful. I think — with you, Harilek — that all this must be meant."

She was silent for a minute. Then she went on.

"Are all of you Christians? The doctor and the other, and the darker-faced men?"

"The darker-faced men are not, though they also believe in one God, but they do not believe in Christ, saying that He was only a great prophet, not God. My two friends are Christians by birth, but the doctor says that such things are beyond him, and he will not believe in anything he cannot see or handle and prove for himself. Wrexham — the stout man you saw for a minute last night — believes in God, I think, but he pretends he is not sure, and so, like many people, from wanting to be quite sure of everything, he is not even sure of not believing."

"That must be very sad for him."

"It is, since he is such a good man. However, if we get to heaven we shall find him and lots more up above us, all right, for all the good things they have done so much better than we who, knowing more, should be better than they."

"True, Harilek. You, like me, are clearly a believer in the faith. I am more than glad."

We were silent a little after that, and then she asked where Wrexham was, so I told her what he was doing, and how he had tried to get the old chief's body back to bury.

"He is clearly a brave man. Fancy crawling right up to the gates like that," said Aryenis. "Is he also a soldier?"

"Not always, though he has fought much. He is an engineer, one who has knowledge of building and mines, and the making of all kinds of metal-work and such things."

"And the darker-faced men?"

"Yes, they are soldiers. One of them — the one who spoke to you this morning — is one of the kind skilled in making forts and in attacking them. He was with Wrexham in the wars. The other is an ordinary soldier who was under my command. Both are very brave and have seen many battles."

"But why have they darker faces than you? At least, their faces are not much darker than yours, Harilek, but

their skins are, as I can tell by their hands and feet. But your face is only dark from sun, for your skin is white like mine. I could see that when your hat was off. Are they of a different race?"

"Yes. They live in a very hot country which is ruled by my people."

"And were you a commander of many men there?"

"During the war I was a commander of a thousand men, like the one who helped us in the gate."

This was a bit of an exaggeration considering the frequently pitiable proportions of my battalion in the more hectic days of the war. Still, at the *dépôt* I once commanded nearly thirteen hundred, so the average was not too bad. Besides, "commander of a thousand" sounded something like an old Greek title I remembered, and I couldn't go into details of modern military organization.

"'Commander of a thousand.' Then you must be a big chief."

"Not a bit. Only quite a little one. My country is very big."

"Well, when you were older — for you are not old, any of you — you would have been a commander of many more — a really big chief," said she, with feminine ignorance and optimism.

"Perhaps, perhaps not. But, anyway, I gave up being a soldier, and was going back to my land in my own country where my sister lives. Then Wrexham persuaded me to come with him to look for these hills which were once seen by one of his ancestors."

Just then Forsyth came up and suggested our halting for a while. Wrexham and Payindah ought to be up with us, for we had been going over two hours. If not, we ought to wait, and, if they did not come soon, go back.

We dismounted and caused Aryenis intense astonishment with our pipes. Evidently tobacco was unknown in the Sakae country. However, a shock or two more was nothing after the number she'd had. But the box of matches in-

trigued her tremendously. I think, after the mirror, the matches were the thing which took her fancy most of all. Both were articles of practical utility, whereas guns and watches — especially watches — were obviously inconsequential frills to the feminine mind, playthings for the stupider sex, but of no use to the more practical one intent on much bigger problems of dress and the household. Aryenis, like most women, had only three times she took notice of — past, Present (with a capital P), and future. The idea of a finicky division into hours and minutes struck her severely logical mind as absolutely unnecessary.

The more I saw of Aryenis, the more convinced did I become that woman — the ever-changing — never changes at all in reality. Except that Aryenis is much nicer-looking and cleverer, there is not the slightest difference between her and the various women I used to meet at home.

Half an hour later Wrexham and Payindah came up, the latter carrying the steel cap of the first fellow I had killed. The irrepressible Wrexham had collected it as a souvenir. Nothing would have induced me to crawl out into the clearing under the gate merely to gather a useless bit of loot.

He said that they had seen no signs of life all night, save for the lights mentioned in his note. At daybreak some arrows had been fired rather aimlessly from the loopholes toward the gorge, whereupon he and Payindah had opened rapid fire at the arrow-slits, and the arrows forthwith ceased for good.

After spending an hour sniping the gate at longer and longer intervals, they had connected up the booby-traps Wrexham had prepared with his little tin of powder and slipped noiselessly away.

He reckoned the enemy would not venture to follow us for a while, and if they did the booby-traps would stop them the first time they tried, even if not indefinitely. All five of the men in the clearing were dead now, and no effort had been made from the gate to get them in, so the enemy were obviously pretty panicky. Still, for the rest of the time we were under the cliffs we never dispensed with a sentry at night.

We travelled steadily for three days, following the line of cliffs, which curved very gradually toward the northeast, with, to our right, always the waste of sand. Aryenis told us that, as far as she knew, the whole country was ringed with hills and surrounded by desert on all sides. According to her, it was a big country, since it was six days' journey from one side to the other even on horseback. Allowing twenty miles a day as a maximum, and taking off something for the roads being winding, as they must be in a country obviously hilly, that meant at least a hundred miles across. As a matter of fact, our estimate proved pretty accurate, for later on Wrexham made a rough survey of it, and it was over the hundred in length and nearly seventy in breadth.

The marches were as monotonous as the one across the desert had been, and we saw no signs of life and found no water. It was lucky we had been able to water the animals and fill up our tanks before we started from the gate. The camels were now very gaunt and getting weak, for we had had to reduce their ration to a minimum. It was clear that, if we could not get into the country, our chances of ever getting back home again were small, since the camels would be too weak for the long marches back across the desert, even although we had water. They wanted rest and grazing badly. Still, I think that none of us felt really depressed, since up to date things had worked out so extraordinarily well. The rain in the desert and our finding Aryenis both served to strengthen our idea that we were meant to get through.

Aryenis herself kept our spirits up. She had quite recovered her own, and the prospect of getting back to her home, of which she was clearly passionately fond, kept her ever cheerful, even despite the trials of her wardrobe.

I never wish to meet more cheerful company. She was *bonne camarade* from the very beginning. She had apparently sized us up the first night; had come to the conclusion that for mere men we were quite respectable beings, and treated us accordingly. By the end of the second day she had taken command of the table, and especially of the tea-

pot. Tea, like tobacco, was unknown to her, but she took to the former at once, and, when Wrexham had instructed her in the art of making it, made it herself at every meal, Firoz coming obediently with really boiling water. It was a notable change from the gun-fire type which we had drunk hitherto.

I was afraid at first that Firoz might resent her taking charge, remembering the speedy disappearance of the old servants of my various bachelor acquaintances when their masters took unto themselves wives. But Firoz took it absolutely lying down, until Aryenis — not knowing a word of his language — superintended all our meals. The third day, while we were fixing up camp, I saw her over at Firoz's fire, much gesticulating going on, and the lady herself apparently cooking something.

That night she was first at table, and, after the inevitable corned beef, Firoz uncovered with great pride two plates of crisp cakes and some sweets. Aryenis, investigating our kitchen arrangements, had inquired concerning our *chupattis*, which she considered extremely nasty, and the upshot had been Forsyth's producing some baking powder, unheeded since the flight of the cook, and explaining its use. She annexed it forthwith, as well as a tin of condensed milk, a discovery that delighted her when she was told what it was.

"There," said Aryenis, "those are worth eating. I made them myself, and I know. Why do men when they do not have a woman to nurse them content themselves with anything that a servant puts in front of them?"

We were dumb, as always, when Aryenis reproved us. I've never seen two unattached men lie down to be kicked so meekly as did Wrexham and Forsyth once she announced — not in words, of course — her intention of ruling the place as long as she honoured us with her presence. I, myself, having for many years been under a masterful elder sister who took me over at the age of three when my mother died, had long since learnt the folly of pretending to have a will of my own,

except when I could get out of range, and, of course, situated as we were, we could not get out of range of Aryenis.

The first evening out she commandeered all our available stock of needles, thread, and the like, and proceeded to overhaul our frayed and much-worn clothes, so that by the third day there were buttons where buttons should be, and patches where had hitherto been only openwork.

Yes; she took charge of us as if we were a trio of small boys mislaid by their parents, and — we liked it.

She gazed upon us in turn after her remarks about our manner of living, as though defying us to produce any reasonable reason, and, seeing that we were suitably worm-like, passed the sweets round. Sugar was evidently familiar enough to her. We had only the coarse bazaar article, and found much the same in Sakae land.

We began once more to consider our personal appearance, even though water was so scarce. Forsyth wore a tie at every meal, for instance — only a khaki one, it is true, but still a tie. This excited Aryenis's emulation, and, searching among our kit under pretence of repairs, she found an old regimental tie of mine which had somehow failed to get lost or stolen during our six months' march. She forthwith took it into wear, knotted about her throat rather *à la Montmartre*, and asked me why I had hidden such a treasure when I was getting clothes for her.

Despite anxiety about the future, the weakening camels, our limited water-supply, and the possibility of not finding a way up — a possibility we did not like to reflect on overmuch, since it spelt something not unlike a two to one chance of dying in the sand trying to get back, we were, thanks to Aryenis, a comparatively cheerful little party, especially in the evenings. We had picked up a certain amount of fuel by the stream banks outside the gate where there were some small trees and a good quantity of thick reeds, and after the evening meal each night Firoz brought us over the remains of his cooking fire and a handful or two of fuel, and we sat round it under the starlit sky. Aryenis, with the

firelight playing on her face, my old tie making a splash of colour in the big black collar of her *poshtin*, the skirts of which mostly concealed the offending blot of the flannel trousers, curled up on the rugs we spread for her; the rest of us sitting round smoking, while we answered her endless questions about our country, or Forsyth strummed to us on his tiny banjoline, and gave us *revue* selections in his pleasing baritone, and then Aryenis in a real clear soprano sang us haunting snatches — music like old, old Western chant. And in the background the dim forms of the camels, the silhouette of the little tent, and the low murmur of the men's talk round their bubbling hookah.

We might be going to leave our bones in the sand at the end of it all, but taking Aryenis's cue, we lived in the Present (with the capital P), and three very pleasant days they were, and evenings that ended all too soon when Aryenis finally retired to the tent, and we rolled into our blankets under the open sky.

CHAPTER XI

THE CAVES

"THE way lies up there," said Aryenis, pointing.

"Can we climb up to those caves? I know that is the place, because I remember the arch."

She was guiding the riding camel, with me as a passenger behind. Her first slight apprehension of the ungainly beasts had quickly disappeared, and for the last two days she had insisted on the front seat and the control of the nose-rope.

We were a few hundred yards out into the sand from the base of the cliffs, where, after marching six miles on the fourth morning, we had found under a projecting shoulder of rock, a little spring-fed pool with a stream running away out into the sands, doubtless to be swallowed up before very far. There was some scant vegetation, and Wrexham had halted the camels for water.

A mile and a half beyond us was a semi-detached hill, which jutted out from the main mass, still steep as ever. It projected a mile or so into the desert — a long hog-back of rock, with sides precipitous enough for the first three or four hundred feet, but which then sloped comparatively gently to the crest.

When we stopped at the water, Aryenis, who had been scanning the outlying hill ever since it first showed up, edged her camel out into the sand, and then gave a cry of joy, as round the shoulder of rock we saw the point where the outlying hill joined the main wall.

"I was right. Look; there is the great arch," she had cried.

The outlier joined on to the high cliffs at a height of perhaps sixteen hundred or seventeen hundred feet. But at the junction swelled up the most peculiar natural formation I have ever seen. It was a giant arch of limestone, formed of strata bent by some primeval convulsion of the earth, and

from which in the course of ages the central softer layers had been weathered away, leaving the hard outer ones as a true arch.

One sees many cases where the strata run up into partial arches, leaving, as it were, the piers on either side and perhaps a small piece of the bow, but the central portion is always lacking, either snapped in the original disruption or weathered away later. Never before have I met a case of the whole fold remaining in arched form. Springing up from the crest of the hog-back to a height of some three hundred feet over a wide bow, it then curved in to join the great precipitous wall we had followed these last four days.

And just above it in the cliff face were some dark shadows, which Aryenis was indicating as the caves of which she had told us. On looking with my glasses they proved to be, as she had said, unmistakable openings.

"Can we climb up there?" she asked again impatiently.

"They seem some height above the arch, and the sides of the lower hill are none too easy. But if we can get up anywhere, it will be at the point farthest out, which looks lower than the rest. We'll call the others and ride over there."

We fetched Wrexham and Forsyth, and showed them the great arch and the caves above.

"By Jove, what a quaint formation!" said Forsyth. "I've never seen a thing of that type on such a scale. I've seen tiny editions of it, but never anything approaching that size. It'll take a bit of climbing, I should say, looking at it from here."

As we went out to the far end of the lower hill, we asked Aryenis if the caves were used by her people.

"No. No one ever goes there now. They are very deep, and are supposed to have spirits in them, and people are afraid to go down into their darkness. They were once an old pagan temple, I think."

"How did you find your way into them, then?" I asked.

She laughed. "My brother teased me about being afraid of the dark, so I told him I was much braver than he was,

and that I would go down into the caves. We have a house quite close to them. And I said that he wouldn't dare to come. So, of course, he came. There were long, long dark passages, but we had a lantern, and we didn't see or hear anything at all. At the end we came out into a big open cave with pillars carved in it, and some smaller caves on each side. All had openings looking down on that big arch. Afterwards we brought my father there, but none of the other people come, for they are rather afraid of spirits, and the caves don't take you anywhere."

When we got to the far end where the hog-back terminated above the desert, we found that, as we had thought, the sheer part was nothing like so high as nearer to the main cliff. Also it was not so smooth. There were lines of jagged broken strata and projecting folds of rock and crevices, and Forsyth considered it was easily climbable.

"Well, now, the thing is to camp by that water. There is a little grazing for the camels, the same kind as you find at the other side of the desert, so they can't take any harm from it. It will be something green for them to chew," said I.

"Yes," answered Wrexham, "and then, directly we've had a mouthful of food, Alec and I, with Payindah, will come over here again and reconnoitre the way up. You say Payindah climbs fairly well. Firoz is rather heavy-footed on a hill. You and Aryenis can stop in camp and see things fixed up. A restful afternoon won't do either of you any harm, especially with that face of yours."

My wound was healing up cleanly, much to Forsyth's and still more to my own satisfaction; but it was inclined to be painful, especially at night, and a quiet afternoon would be by no means unwelcome, more particularly as there would be Aryenis to keep me company. It's funny how circumstances alter things. I suppose it was the unusual surroundings which had thrown us together so much during the last four days, but I couldn't help feeling that I had known her for years and years — in fact, absurd as it sounds, I really at the moment couldn't picture any kind of existence in

which she would be absent. Probably the wide loneliness of the desert had much to do with it.

About midday the reconnoitring party set off. Aryenis and I walked out far enough from the pool where we had camped to be able to see the arch.

While the others were making their way across the sand to the end of the hill, Aryenis turned to me and reminded me that I had not yet told how we had found our way to the hills across the desert. So I gave her an outline of the story of old John Wrexham's journey, and the things he had written in his diary. Then I went on to tell her how Wrexham had come up in 1919 to prospect, and of the man he had found.

"But how wonderful to think that a single man could have made his way so far across the desert. And how extraordinary your friend's finding him in the way he did. I wonder who he could have been. Were there any things on him to tell?"

"Yes; there was a picture which we have with us here, and we think it must be one of his sister because of the writing on it. I'll get it, if you like. . . . Why, what is it?"

Aryenis's exclamation of wonder had stopped me.

"A picture of his sister! But we were sure he had died in the gate when the Shamans captured him! Tell me," she went on breathlessly, "was the name 'Euphrosine' on the picture? A girl with brown hair and blue eyes?"

"Yes; that's it. I hope it wasn't some great friend of yours?" I said, seeing her eyes.

"But it was! It was Ziné's brother! She's my greatest friend. But, no! It isn't a great shock, because we were sure he was dead. We never even thought of him being alive, although the spies said they believed he had escaped from the gate. But, in the first place, we did not believe them, and then, although a certain archer of the chief Shaman's guard, who professed a secret friendliness for our folk, and we did our best to help him through them, we never thought he could traverse the desert, nor did we know what lay beyond."

She was silent a space, her lips moving, praying, I think, for the man's soul after the manner of the Christian Sakae.

"Who was he, then, and how came he by his death, or rather by the captivity that led to it?" I asked at last.

"He was one of the biggest chiefs of the Green Sakae. As I told you, the Shamans for some years have been overcoming the other clans — the Red, Brown, and Green Sakae — always beginning by stirring up the people against their chiefs. Some were slain by their own folk, misled by the Shamans' guile; then others, whose people would not rise against them, were attacked by the Shamans when the country was weakened, and so overthrown and slain, save some few who escaped to us.

"When the state of the Green Sakae country was at its worst, Carius — that was his name — sent Ziné to stop with us for greater safety, hoping that things would be better. But by treachery the Shamans captured his fort by night. We heard that, though he made a good fight, he was taken prisoner and carried off to their country.

"My father tried to help him by spies — we were not at war with the Shamans then, nor were we strong enough to invade their country — sending clothes and money, which the spies promised to get to him if he were put out to death through the gate after the Shamans' cruel fashion. And Ziné put the picture in with the clothes. The spies told us they had succeeded with the help of the archer I mentioned, and said that it was common talk among the guard that next day his body could not be found. So then for a space we hoped, believing that he had got the things they said had been dropped over the cliffs and freed himself and escaped. But after a while we felt sure he must be dead, and thought that the spies, after the manner of such men, lied to us to get the greater reward."

"Then is Euphrosine, or Ziné, as you call her, still with you, or is there peace in her country now?"

"No; it is as bad as ever, for there is no rule, and the people fight among themselves, and the Shamans slay and pillage

as they will, now helping one section, now another, for they do not really desire to rule the land themselves yet. They wish to destroy all law, so that they may then easily set up their own customs, when folk are wearied of war and pillage and unable to resist them. I do not know much about their rule, save that some of their decrees are foul beyond imagining. As I told you, they worship evil gods. But when we get home my father will tell you more about it all than I can. I think he hopes to destroy the Shamans some day and restore peace to the other clans. Then, if he does that, Ziné will be chief of her clan again, for she has no other close relations."

"Do women rule, then, in your country?"

"But yes, sometimes, if there be no close male relatives. But I would not like it, since it often means they have to marry some one whom they would not, lest he whom they would marry be not acceptable to the clan. I am glad I have a brother."

Strangely enough, so was I, though I did not say so.

"Do not women ever rule in your country, Harilek?" she went on.

"Yes, sometimes; and they sometimes do not like it for the same reason, that their husbands are chosen for them."

"Which is *quite* wrong," said Aryenis, with a defiant tilt of her well-shaped chin. "A woman should always choose her own man, although," she added as a minor qualification, "of course, he is always allowed to think *he* has done the choosing."

"I believe it is like that in my own country, though I do not know from experience," said I. Aryenis looked at me thoughtfully but said nothing, so I dropped the subject and rigged up the telescope. "The others ought to be in sight on the hill now. It's nearly an hour since they left."

Within a minute or so I picked them up, three tiny figures making their way up the more gentle slope above the cliff part. They worked upward until they reached the foot of the arch, where they halted awhile.

Then slowly — slowly — they clambered up and up until

at last all three stood erect and walked across the great bow till they stopped under the cliff face which towered above them. There they stayed for some time.

"Think you they can get up to the caves? Oh, they *must* be able to!" said Aryenis, who was using my glasses. She picked up things extraordinarily quickly, though, like all women, the "how it worked" interested her not at all. All she desired was a sufficiency of knowledge to get practical use out of things.

"Yes; they're sure to get up, though perhaps not this afternoon. They may want more rope."

I pretended an assurance I was far from feeling. The cliff above the end of the arch looked sheer as a house wall and as smooth.

"They're coming back again," said Aryenis with a sigh of disappointment. "I don't know any other way if we cannot climb that."

I was more than disappointed. The possibility or otherwise of reaching the caves was probably life or death to us all. But we hadn't told Aryenis that. Gloomily and silently we watched them make their way down.

However, on their arrival in camp, their report was a shade better than I had hoped, though none too good. They considered that with a little work the first part could be made easily practicable even for men with heavy loads, and the second part up to the foot of the arch was quite a gentle slope.

The arch itself was more difficult. It rose nearly three hundred feet according to Wrexham's estimate, tapering upward and inward in a gentle curve, till at the centre it was not more than twelve or fourteen feet wide. However, with ropes the loads could be got up on to it.

But to get up the rock face to the caves was quite a different matter. If we could get people from above to let down ropes, it would be all right, though unpleasant. But Aryenis had said no one ever came there. So absolutely our only hope was for one of us to succeed in climbing up with the

rope, and fix it to something in the cave by which to help the rest up.

"There's a sloping seam in the rock stretching up to the cave mouth as far as we can see," said Wrexham, drinking the tea Aryenis had poured out for him. "It doesn't look to me as if it gave foothold to anything bigger than a lizard, but Alec, who's done a lot of rock-climbing, thinks it might just be possible for a clever climber given a miraculous amount of luck. Anyway, it's our only chance, and we've got to take it or give up and go back; and that, as you know, is at least even chances of pegging out while trying to get across the desert. The camels are pretty done now."

He pulled out his pipe and lit it.

"Well, what are we going to do, then?" I asked, looking across to where Forsyth was talking to Aryenis.

"To-morrow we'll all go up, leaving Firoz and Sadiq here with the camels. We'll take every bit of rope we can scratch together, as well as the two one hundred fifty foot lengths of Alpine rope. Alec is going to make a shot at getting up the seam by himself. He says it's no good two men going, because the rock is so sheer that if one slipped the other would be pulled off, too, and it's no good chucking away two lives. I wanted to go, but he insisted, and as he's done more climbing than I, although I've done a lot of crag-work at home in Durham, I caved in.

"If he can get up he'll fix the rope, and you'll follow, and then we'll get Aryenis up. Then I and Payindah will go back to camp. Aryenis will have to get you out of the caves and through the cliffs, and then — since she says it's in her country — you ought to find friends and be able to come back in the afternoon or else next morning with men and get the rest of us and the kit up."

We went to bed early that night, and perhaps were not quite so cheery as we had been the previous evenings. To-morrow's dawn was going to solve a big question for us — the biggest one in the world probably — since my evening's look at the camels somehow did not seem to fit with sixteen days' journey back across the desert.

Wrexham, Forsyth, and Payindah started first, carrying the ropes, a lantern for use in the caves, two rifles, our *poshtins*, and a bundle of food. I was deputed to look after Aryenis, and so relieved of a load. Wrexham might have saved his forethought, for she climbed better than I, and I don't consider myself a bad hand at mountaineering. But Aryenis hung out over bare rock without a tremor, and smiled at me struggling behind. She said they had a house in the hills — by which I supposed she referred to the high mountain — and that she had climbed ever since she was a child.

As we reached the foot of the arch, I caught sight of Payindah squatting on the rock, just where the slope hid the rest of the arch from us. Looking at it, I wondered how they had got their kit up, for it was pretty steep.

But there were certain projections and jagged bits that gave foot- and hand-hold, and the slope of the arch made it easier. As a matter of fact, it was only the first fifty or sixty feet that was so difficult. Above that, although it did not show from below, the curve forward became more pronounced, and the rock much rougher and easier to move over without fear of slipping.

The whole arch was not unlike an old flying-buttress, steepish at the foot and with a more gradual curve afterwards.

"Come along," said Aryenis, all impatience to get in sight of the caves.

"Wait till they let down the rope," I replied. I thought she would want a rope there.

She looked at me as if I were daft, and before I could say another word had sprung up the rock and stood balancing on nothing ten feet over my head.

"Come," she said, and went on.

I wasn't going to let a girl beat me if I could help it, so I slipped off my heavy *chaplis*, fastened them on to my belt, wriggled my toes into what foothold I could find, and followed. But she had caught Payindah's outstretched hand, and was over the corner while I was still twenty feet behind.

Payindah hauled me up, and then, with "Wah! the miss-sahib must be a true hill-woman," he followed her. It was easier going after that, a long smooth slope of perhaps two in one, twenty to twenty-five feet broad, with a sheer drop on either side. Aryenis went up it without an effort, Payindah and I panting behind her.

A hundred feet farther up in front I could now see Wrexham, with Forsyth still farther ahead. Another five minutes, with the arch getting narrower and narrower, and we came to the top, whence it splayed in a gentle curve over forty feet or so of nothingness to join the main wall. Luckily we all had good heads for height, but less experienced people would have sat down rather tremblingly, I think.

Picture to yourself a narrow causeway of rock only a few feet wide, perhaps twenty feet thick, sprung forty or fifty feet over a drop of nearly three hundred to the back of the hill we had left, and gently sloping downward again from the centre into a slight crevice in the towering wall in front, which rose smooth greenish-grey rock, apparently void of any decent hand- or foot-hold hundreds of feet above us.

Some eighty feet above the end of the arch where we stood in the white sunlight, the wide desert spread out behind and the wind whistling past us, were the black entrances to the caves, three of them, the centre one — the biggest — perhaps twenty feet across, almost directly above the arch.

Wrexham and Forsyth had been joined by Aryenis, and were talking together on the narrow end of the arch where it joined the cliff.

I crossed the arch, avoiding looking down at the dizzy drop below, and joined them. Aryenis turned to me with a little smile of triumph.

"Oh, Harilek, you can run over flat stones all right, but you are slow — slow — on a hill. I must teach you to go quick."

"Thank you. You shall," I said. Then I turned to Forsyth. "How the deuce are we going to get up there?"

"Up that crack in the rock," said he, pointing to a thin seam I had not noticed at first.

I looked at it. The more I looked, the less I liked it. I looked again more than doubtfully.

"I shall go up first with the rope, and if I slip you'll have to try and hang on to the end and pick up the bits." He was taking off his coat as he spoke.

We tied the rope round him, and the rest of us got hold of the end, prepared to try and pull him clear of the arch if he slipped, a pretty hopeless task.

He took a last look round, and then he stepped out the couple of feet over empty space, clinging to a tiny projection in the rock, got his feet on the edge of the seam which ran slightly slanting, and started up.

I have seen some good cool rock-climbing in my time, but never have I seen any one go up like that.

It took him about twenty — to us — breathless minutes, and for the life of me I could not see what he held on to. On going up myself later (with the rope) I found that the seam projected somewhat from the rock-face, and gave a good hand-hold. Luckily, it was not badly weathered, and so did not break away.

But we all expected every minute to see him slip from his footing and fly downward, and only hoped that he would fall clear of the arch, and so give the rope a chance of checking him in mid-air below us.

"He's there," said Aryenis, as she clapped her hands softly. "He climbs wonderfully."

I could see he had his hands on the cave floor, and was pulling himself in. Then he disappeared from sight.

"Good old Alec," said Wrexham. "Whatever happens now, we shan't die in the desert."

A couple of minutes later he began to tug the rope after him, taking up twenty or twenty-five feet.

After that nothing for a space. Then his head emerged. He was presumably lying on the floor craning out, and he shouted down to us:

"The caves lead upward and inward. It's Aryenis's cave, all right, for it's got some stone pillars in it. I've tied the

rope fast to one, and I'll pull in the slack as Harry comes up." He disappeared into the cave again.

"Now, then, Harry, your turn," said Wrexham, knotting the rope round me.

I started up, keeping my eyes resolutely turned from the three-hundred-foot drop below me, and not feeling at all pleased with the prospect. But, as a matter of fact, with the rope and with the deep crevice which I found in the rock, it was easier than I hoped, and I got up without any more trouble than a few seconds of intense fright when my foot slipped once.

As I stood up and looked round the cavern, I remarked to Forsyth: "What a peculiar place. Are those pillars carved?"

There were pillars of solid rock from floor to ceiling on both sides, stretching away into the darkness at the back. They were smooth, round pillars, devoid of ornamentation, with a slight splay at top and bottom.

"Carved. I looked as I first came up. It's not unlike a church, as a matter of fact. You noticed the ledge as you came in, all along the edge cut out of the rock as though people once sat here and wanted a sort of guard like a window-railing at home?"

"I wonder who first used the place. It does not seem to have been used lately; there are no footmarks in the floor dust."

However, we hadn't much time to wonder about things then. I looked out and saw Wrexham roping up Aryenis, and a minute or two later her clear call came up to ask if we were ready.

We shouted back, and then up she came, just like a cat, we pulling the rope up as she came, so that if she slipped she would only fall the least possible distance. But Aryenis never slipped. She seemed to have eyes in her feet when it came to going over bad places. I reached out, and caught her hands and pulled her into the cave.

As I was unknottting the rope she said: "This is the place.

I remember. The way is there," and she pointed along the right-hand side of the cave.

It took us a little time longer to haul up our belongings, which Wrexham and Payindah had tied up in three bundles, wrapping the rifles in the *poshtins* to prevent damage against the rock. Then we let down the rope: the others fastened it below, coiled up the slack, and waving us good luck started back down the hill.

We opened up the bundles, divided the kit, lit the hurricane-lamp, and told Aryenis to show us the way. From the pillared part, which stretched about a hundred feet, we passed through thickening grey gloom into the darkness and silence — darkness and silence that you could feel — of a long, narrow, winding passage with smooth wall and a rounded roof.

Under foot the rock was covered with loose dust, the dust of many, many centuries, I think. The wall showed tool marks in the lantern's dim light, and I remarked to Forsyth that the passage was obviously artificial.

"It is here," he said, "but it may not all be."

Later on we found rough parts, which showed clearly that the original finders of the pillared cave and the smaller ones that led out on either side of it had discovered a line of natural fault and improved it, making the passages big enough to walk in.

Our way wound steadily upward. Luckily there was but the one passage, or Aryenis might not have remembered her way so easily. We passed through two large open spaces, where the light, instead of being reflected back from the rock walls, dimmed and died in the circle of darkness. In one of them there was what looked like a rough altar cut in the wall.

We had been going for nearly half an hour when we remarked a faint grey light ahead. It grew and grew, until rounding a bend we found ourselves in a little open grotto veiled by trees and thick undergrowth.

CHAPTER XII

ARYENIS'S PEOPLE

WE emerged into a thick wood of hill oak and birch, all in russet glory of autumn foliage. And oh! the joy, after our months of marching through the dead waste places of the earth, to tread once more on a thick carpet of fallen leaves starred with wild flowers, and to breathe the scented air that played on our faces, rough and raw from the hot glare, driving sand, and ice-cold nights of the desert we had traversed.

For twenty minutes we threaded our way through the trees till we came to the fringe of the wood, and were just going to push through the undergrowth into the open beyond when Aryenis stopped us.

"Stay," she said; "see if any one is there."

She peeped through the screen of leafage, and then pushed her way cautiously through. Then she turned and beckoned us forward.

We found ourselves in an orchard garden with rows of gnarled and twisted fruit trees, almond and peach for the most part. In the centre was a pergola of old worn stones supporting clusters of vines and a flagged walk bordered with little shrubs. Beyond again were trees cutting off further view. But over them, clear in the sunlight, showed the wonderful mountain we had seen from afar, its great snow-peaks vivid against the blue of the northern sky.

We went down the straight grey path into the trees beyond, and again she checked us while she looked ahead. As she looked, we heard voices, and suddenly Aryenis darted forward, calling out as she went.

We waited a minute or two, and then followed her through the trees, and there in front of us was a little open space of sun-dried grass and a low stone house in the centre. Beyond,

more trees, and then fold after fold of hills stretching away toward the great mountain, terraced hills covered with trees and verdure, and nestled here and there little brown villages.

And in the open space ahead Aryenis, in my grey flannel trousers, in the arms of a tall, grey-haired man, clothed in short, fawn-coloured smock and jerkin of bright steel mail with a blue leather belt, from which hung a short straight sword.

Around the two were several men similarly clad, most of them with steel caps on, and farther back by the house some horses, and other men, more roughly clad, with slung quivers and great bows across their backs. All were talking volubly and excitedly.

As we came out they looked toward us, and Aryenis, turning, seized the tall man by both hands and dragged him up to us. She was laughing and crying all at once.

We stopped as they came up, and she pointed me out to the older man, talking excitedly the while in some strange tongue. He listened gravely for a minute, then he stepped forward and laid both hands on my shoulders, speaking very slowly and distinctly in Greek like Aryenis.

"Sir, my daughter and I thank you. You have given her life, and me the light of my life. Such debts are beyond repayment, but what we can we will do."

Then he half-drew his sword and thrust the hilt into my hands, a gesture which I learnt later implied that he placed himself, his sword, and all his belongings at my disposal for all time.

"Sir," said I, not to be outdone, "the fortune is mine that I have been able to help your daughter. But my companions have as much hand in the matter as I," and I pressed Forsyth forward.

The old man laid his hands on the doctor's shoulders and greeted him, thanking him for what he had done.

In the meantime Aryenis had pulled up another man, a tall straight young fellow with the most pleasing, open, frank

face I have ever seen. A typical lad of the type that you would mark down for your regiment if you could get him.

"This is my brother Stephnos, Harilek," she said.

He held out his sword to me as the elder man had done, and I placed my hand upon the hilt. Then he thrust it back into its sheath and took both my hands.

"Harilek, as my sister calls you, we owe you my sister's life. All we have is yours."

Then the other men with them came up and shook our hands. One and all were fair-skinned men of European type, straight features, grey, blue, and hazel eyes, with hair varying from yellow to dark brown. They were for the most part sun-tanned, but with the unmistakably transparent skin that marks the true white races.

Aryenis was holding her father's arm, her face radiant with joy at the reunion, and talking fast while he stroked her red-gold hair.

Then at last she ceased and turned to us.

"My father came here yesterday to see the forts. There is real war now, which he will tell you about. After we have eaten, we will take men with ropes and bring the others up the cliff. Now I go to find — skirts!" she said, laughing.

She led the way, still holding her father tightly by the hand, and the rest of us followed.

As we reached the house, the men standing by the horses rushed over to us, all trying to grasp Aryenis's hands. She spoke to them by name, so I gathered that they were men of her own house. There was no mistaking their delight at seeing her, nor her unfeigned joy at being among them again. Kyrlos, as her father was called, spoke to them for a minute or two in their own language, and, though I could not understand what was being said, I guessed that he was talking about Aryenis's escape. I could see them looking at us with interest.

We entered the house, where news of our coming had evidently preceded us, for there were more servants waiting, and among them some women.

Then, after more greetings, Aryenis disappeared with the women. Kyrlos turned to us and said:

"You must be weary after your climb. If you will follow me, I will show you to the guest-room, where you may wash off the dust of the caves before the midday meal. There are but rough quarters here now since, as perhaps you have heard, there is war in the land. Later on, we shall be able to entertain you better."

He led us into a side room giving off the main hall, and a minute later two men entered carrying bowls of water and towels.

"If you will put off your heavy clothes here, and leave your gear, presently Stephnos will fetch you to the dining-chamber."

He looked at our rifles, and then said, pointing:

"These are your weapons, I suppose, though unfamiliar to me. If you wish to leave them here, they will be safe. No man will touch anything."

I took the opportunity of asking him to have grain and forage brought with us when we went to the caves in the afternoon, and also to let us have a guard of men to stay with the camels. They were rather to help Sadiq and keep him company than for protection, for it was clear now that the Shamans would not follow us.

He said he would gladly arrange everything.

"Now, if you will excuse my leaving you, I will go and see my daughter, whom we all thought dead if, indeed, some worse fate had not befallen her."

Then he went out.

"Well," said I, as he went out, "Gobi Greeks are actualities, all right, and here we are. Perfectly good houses, mail shirts, *and* a war. What are we going to do?"

We took off our bandoliers and unslung our rifles. The kit we had carried up had been taken off us outside, and the men piled it by the beds. Forsyth buried his face and hands in the water, and got off some of the dust we had picked up in the caves.

"Chip in, I think," said he. "I like the look of these people, and, unless I'm mistaken, they're a different crowd from your unpleasant friends down by the gate. I only saw one of those by faint moonlight, and he was somewhat the worse for wear, but he didn't look at all the same as this lot."

He finished his toilet and smoothed his hair. "Glad I shaved this morning. I notice that most of the younger-looking men here shave."

He looked at his rifle.

"Are we going to leave them here?" he asked.

"Yes, we may as well. It would look very distrustful if we didn't, and whoever is unpleasant in this country, these people will see us through for a cert."

"Thanks to your finding Aryenis. That was the best bit of luck we've had."

"She's much too nice a girl to have left out in that filthy place," said I, meaning it very much.

I made myself as presentable as my travel-stained garments would allow, and Forsyth retied the bandage round my face. Then Stephnos came in and talked to us. He said Aryenis was changing into somewhat more feminine garments, so we should have to wait a little. He was brimful of excitement, and evidently itching to hear all that had happened. So, sitting on the low beds, we gave him an account of our adventures since we found his sister in the gate. He listened breathlessly to it all, putting in shrewd questions at intervals. His Greek was just like that of Aryenis, and we had no trouble in talking to him or understanding what he said.

When we had finished, he led us through the hall into a room at the far end where a fire was burning, for the air was very chilly except in the sun. There were two of the men we had met outside standing there, who greeted us as we came in. They were some of Kyrlos's officers. At the far end servants were arranging a meal on tables ranged round three sides of the room.

A little later Aryenis and her father came in. But quite a different Aryenis.

Her red-gold hair was dressed in a big knot at the back of her head with a clasp at each side. Her dress was of plain white, save for the blue embroidery which ran round the hem of the short skirt and the ends of the short sleeves. Over her shoulder she wore a shawl, doubtless to conceal her bandage, for the dress had a low-cut square neck. It was gathered in at her hips by a belt of fine worked leather, fastened loosely with the ends hanging down in front, and my old tennis-shoes had been replaced by twisted leather sandals of some white hide.

Krylos motioned us to table, and I found myself placed between him and Aryenis. Forsyth was on his other hand, with Stephnos next to him.

"You see, I do *not* wear trousers in my own country," confided Aryenis. "Skirts!"

"Nice short ones," I reminded her. "They are indeed nice, as you said."

"Compliments again, Harilek! But I won't quarrel with them this time. They might be sincere now, whereas last time —"

"Whereas last time they were of even greater value really since your clothes were against you."

"*Your* clothes," she reminded me.

Then food was brought in, a stew of mutton, fat-tailed sheep, I think; some hill partridges, and afterwards sweet cakes with an amber-coloured wine. Forsyth and I missed our forks badly, but we managed to get through the meal without disgracing ourselves.

"You're not coming with us this afternoon through the caves in those clothes, I imagine, Aryenis?" said I.

"Indeed, I am not, Harilek. I'm going to stop in and rejoice my feminine soul in contemplating pleasing garments and getting the desert out of my hair. I very nearly had food brought in to me, but I thought, as it was your first meal in our country, I would come and watch you after seeing you live on Firoz's food in the desert. What did you call that stuff that pretended to be bread? '*Cheptis*,' or some-

thing like that? That's ungrateful of me, though, considering the trouble Firoz took over me always. But he was not meant to be a cook."

"I said he was a soldier."

"Yes; I can imagine him as that. He makes me think of some of my father's older soldiers. Very gruff and very solid, but very kind withal. But not skilled overmuch in the pleasant things of life."

"Such as cakes and sweets made with milk out of cans."

"As you say, Harilek. All the same, you liked the things I made with stuff out of metal boxes, even though the milk tasted funny, not really like milk that grows in proper cows. Well, I'm going to vanish for the afternoon now and get rid of the desert, which seems to have blown right through my skin."

Then we went out and found a score of men awaiting us outside. Some carried ropes, others sacks of grain and bundles of forage. Four of them were armed: evidently the guard Kyrlos had promised us.

As we walked up toward the cave in the woods, I remarked how tall they were — the average height must have been well over five feet, nine inches — and I asked Kyrlos if all his people were as tall, or if these were a picked lot. He looked round at them, and said that they were quite ordinary men. Then he asked me if they were taller than our people, and I had to admit that, if they were average samples, then they were distinctly so.

Again we noted the remarkable fairness of their skins and hair, and their blue and grey eyes. Yet these were clearly ordinary serving-men or soldiers, not like the men who had breakfasted with us, who were obviously persons of quality.

We followed them down the long dark passage, Stephnos and Forsyth leading, and finally came out in the pillared cave. I could hear the men behind us talking in low tones, and looking from side to side with curious and rather awed glances.

On looking out, we saw Payindah and Wrexham sitting on

the far side of the arch. Kyrlos looked over and remarked that we must be like birds to climb that without the rope, and asked who was the first to come up.

Seeing us in the cave mouth, they crossed the arch. We dropped another rope, and Wrexham, tying it round him, came clambering up the thin projecting seam amid exclamations from the watching men. We introduced him to Kyrlos and Stephnos, and he said a few words in reply to their thanks for helping Aryenis. Then he turned to me.

"They *are* white folk, all right, then." He was looking round at the men in the cave. "Upstanding-looking fellows, too. Wonder who they are? Not much like what I've seen of the modern Greek, by long chalks." He came back to the point. "What have you arranged?"

"My proposal is that we get up all the kit and just leave Sadiq down with the camels. Aryenis's father is giving us a guard to look after them, and also to see that Sadiq doesn't try to do a bolt into the blue — not that he's likely to."

I had asked Kyrlos if there was any likelihood of the Shamans coming round from the gate, and he said he was sure that no one would venture out even so far as the stream outside the *tangi*, let alone following forty waterless miles round the base of the cliffs. No one had ever ventured into the desert, which the people feared very much; in fact, many of the more ignorant folk believed that there were no other living men beyond it, only strange beasts and fearsome spectres.

The camels would be quite safe there, but he was sending down four men to stay with them so as to keep our man company, since they could not be brought up. He said that since his men had seen us and knew that Aryenis had been some days in the desert, they would not now be afraid to stop down below.

"That's all right, then," said Wrexham. "We'd better get down and get the things up as quickly as possible before it gets dark."

Kyrlos insisted on going down, too, to see the camels, for

he was always keen on new things. So in the end we all went down, taking men with us to carry the grain and forage for the camels, and to help the guard with their kit. It was quicker now since we were lowered down instead of having to climb, and in next to no time we were across the arch and well on our way down the slope.

I introduced Payindah to Kyrlos, and explained that he had been the other actor in getting Aryenis out of the Gates of Death, whereupon Payindah got thanked just as I had been.

"Who is the sahib and what is his talk?" asked Payindah.

I explained that he was Aryenis's father and a great noble in the land, and then, for lack of better explanation, went on that he was of the people of Sikandar Balkarnayn (Alexander the Great), and that was the speech he used.

"Wah," said Payindah. "Then we be in some sort of the same blood, since we also are of Sikandar's stock."

As a matter of fact there was little difference, save for his darker wheat colour and his black bobbed locks, between Payindah, with his Greek features and his Greek form (we used to remark when he was wrestling in the regiment that he might have stood for a Greek statue), his green-grey eyes, and his red low-cut skull-cap, similar in shape to the steel caps worn by Kyrlos's following, and the white-skinned men collected on the arch.

"Was this man also in the wars Aryenis says you come from?" asked Kyrlos. "He looks like a fighter, and I see that he carries the noise weapon even as you."

"In that and other wars. A brave man even among brave men. He asked who you were and what was your speech, and when I told him that it was the speech of Alexander, he claimed kinship with your people."

"Is he also of Greece? His colour is somewhat dark. Are there men of different colours in your land?"

"No. He is from a country far from mine, but one which is ruled by my folk, wherein I served as a soldier. Alexander of Macedon held his country two thousand years and more ago, and the folk still talk of it."

"I have read of him in the old books. A valiant man."

There was much astonishment when we got to the camp and they saw the camels, while Sadiq and Firoz were equally astonished to see them.

Kyrlos in particular spent a long time studying the camels, much as you or I might hang around a live mastodon if one chanced to be discovered. The men, who had probably never even heard of such beasts, were full of amazement, and kept on going round and round them chattering, pointing out what struck them as peculiar features of the weird creatures, I suppose.

We explained to Sadiq what he was to do, and introduced him to the men who were to stop with him. He was rather alarmed at first, but, on hearing that none of the local people ever went out into the desert, and that he was as safe there as in his own country, he cheered up, though he said it would be dull with no one to talk to. Considering the very little speech he was able to exchange with Firoz and Payindah, and the fact that he was at best a very taciturn individual, this did not weigh much with us.

We left the tent and the water-tanks down below, but brought up everything else, taking the bundles on camels as far as the cliff foot. Kyrlos and Stephnos rode back on the spare camel, a great experience for them.

We had a little difficulty in getting our things up over the arch, but we managed it all right with the ropes and the extra hands, and the cave party hauled us up without much trouble. But the setting sun made us hurry somewhat, for the arch was no place on which to be overtaken by darkness.

Kyrlos detailed an old and trusted servant to look after the carrying party, and next day ordered a rope-ladder to be securely fixed, so that the guard could get up without assistance if need arose. This servant, who lived on the estate, would visit the cave every day to receive the guard's report, and would arrange for sending down food, forage, and fuel from time to time.

Then, leaving Payindah and Firoz to follow us, with the others carrying our kit, we returned to the house.

CHAPTER XIII

WE JOIN WITH KYRLOS

WHEN we reached the house again, we found Aryenis by the fire in the hall, having clearly removed the desert from her skin and hair, for she was looking even prettier than before. She and Kyrlos went off together, doubtless to talk over her adventures.

When our kit arrived, we followed her example, steaming ourselves in boiling water in the bathroom attached to the guest-chamber, a little room floored with red tiles around a sunken stone bath. The Blue Sakae are great believers in cleanliness of person and clothes, and this taste was by no means confined to the upper classes, despite the coldness of their winter climate.

It was good to soak the desert sand out of our systems, and feel our sun-dried, wind-hardened skins expanding once more under the soothing influence of clean hot water.

The evening meal was a rather more ornate edition of the midday one; but we did not sit long over it, for Aryenis pronounced for an early bed, and the other men drifted away quickly, so that Kyrlos and Stephnos alone were left. We sat over the fire drinking our wine for a space, and it was clear that Kyrlos had matters he was more anxious to talk of than mere commonplaces about our adventures and the customs of the Sakae, concerning which Forsyth had been asking him numerous questions.

Six days with Aryenis had accustomed us to the strange accent and unfamiliar idioms of their Greek, and we never had any more difficulty in talking with the educated people.

Finally Kyrlos plunged into the matter which was evidently nearest his heart.

"And now, my guests," he began, "if it be not venturing discourtesy, I would know somewhat of the reasons which

brought you into this land of ours where no stranger has come for centuries. Aryenis has told me something, but I would hear more from your own lips, more particularly since she spoke of wars in your land, and there will shortly be such war in this country as has never been. Wherefore came you hither?"

"We are three travellers, Kyrlos, who came seeking new scenes, for — as your daughter has, perhaps, told you — some hundred years ago a relative of Wrexham's came to the gate of this land of which our people have no knowledge."

"Yes, Aryenis told me of that, and of the finding of Carius — a most strange event, and one with a hidden meaning, I feel sure. But what of these wars you speak of? Aryenis says that you, Harilek, are a soldier by trade — one holding high command. But your friends also have been fighting, though it seems they are not soldiers at all times."

"For six years our people have been at war, the greatest war of all history — so great that men speak of it as 'the world war,' since, save one or two of the smaller nations, not one people in the world but was engaged fighting upon one side or the other. And being so great, all men, whether soldiers or not, took part in it. At the end, when our people were victorious, we three, having no wives or children to call us home, set out on this journey, seeking change of scene and adventure."

"Are you of those who fight for love of fighting, then? Would you stay here and fight for us with your wondrous weapons, which Aryenis tells me slay at arrow-shot distance with naught but a little noise, killing mailed men as though they were clothed but in silk?"

Forsyth turned to me.

"What about it, Harry? Are you going to chip in with this bally war? I like these people, but I thought we'd come out on a rest cure, as it were."

"Depends very much on what it's all about," put in Wrexham. "If it's a tribal blood feud, I'm not joining. But if it means a smack at the beasts in the gate for their mishandling

of Aryenis, and of other people, too, by the look of the place, then I'm for it."

"Yes, every time," said I, thinking of the first time I saw Aryenis, and of the long hair that Wrexham had tangled his hand in the first night.

Kyrlos was watching us reflectively, the firelight playing on his grave features. He is a handsome man in a way, with rather a high-coloured countenance, pronounced eyebrows over dark blue eyes, and a somewhat aquiline nose. Not over-given to speech, but we found him well worth listening to when he opened his mouth. I turned to him again:

"We are not of those who fight for fighting's sake, nor for profit after the manner of the mercenaries of old times. We have seen years of war wherein thousands of men died every day." (Kyrlos opened his eyes at this.) "But under certain conditions we might join with you. Will you first tell us somewhat concerning this coming war of which you speak? Is it against the Shamans who took Aryenis captive? We gathered from her that they are an evil people and stirrers-up of strife."

"Yes, it is against these same Shamans. But, as you know but little of this land, perhaps I had better first tell you somewhat of our people, so that you may the better understand the reasons for the war. Save the Shamans, who came here whence we know not, all the Sakae are of the same race, and entered this country many, many hundreds of years ago. We believe that then they were one people under one ruler. But for centuries now we have been — according to our books — divided into four clans known by colours. Of the origins of these names I cannot speak. Some hold that it is from the colour of the ornaments which are favoured by the different clans, others say it is some relic of old pagan worship which has lost its meaning, and now remains but a name. But these be matters of conjecture — of no great import. My clan — the Blue Sakae — is the biggest of all, though the Green Sakae, who live next to us, are not greatly fewer in numbers. Then there are the Red Sakae, who live

beyond them. These three are much alike in manners and customs. The fourth clan, which is smaller than the other three, is known as the Brown Sakae, and differs greatly. These have retained all the old savagery of our people, are entirely pagan, and unaffected by the civilization which — together with Christianity — was brought by Greeks who came to this land in the beginning of the ages.

“In the centre of the Brown Sakae country, and above the gate which you found, dwell a small people, few in numbers, but exceedingly cunning, called the Black Shamans, keepers of the gate from the old days, great magicians, skilled in the working of metals from the mines which abound in the Brown Sakae country. Doctors also as you, Forsyth, but I think of evil kind.

“From time to time there have been wars between the clans — in the main, wars of rulers only; but never have any of the clans fought with the Shamans nor they with us, and their country has been held sacred, so that none of the Sakae enter it save for the yearly council of the chiefs of all the clans, which was held there in the spring. The chief Shaman himself attended the council meetings.

“But now for ten or twelve years a change has come over the land. The chief Shaman has waxed greatly powerful, and exercises influence among the other clans such as he has no right to do, save in giving advice at the general council of the chiefs.

“But by degrees he contrived to turn the people against all the chiefs who would not fall in with his wishes, uniting the less powerful leaders against the greater. When these were overthrown, he turned the common people against the lesser chiefs who had cast down those above them, until in the end there were no rulers save those who did his will in all matters.

“He began slowly with the sections nearest to his country, so that his influence spread as a spider’s web, ever growing and growing. And in the end, save for one or two sections of the Green Sakae who still held out, such as that of Carius

whom you found in the desert, or the people of the old chief who was slain with Aryenis in the gate, all the Red, Green, and Brown Sakae were under his hand. And then, of course, we of the Blue Sakae no longer went to the councils, which had become only a play, there being but one voice at all times — that of the chief Shaman: those others spoke in seemingly independent guise, but in reality as they had been privily bidden. For though talking always of the freedom of men, the chief Shaman rules entirely by fear, and he that thwarts him dies, sometimes speedily by an arrow in the gate, more often slowly as he would have had Carius die, often still more lingeringly in their citadel, so that for many days such prisoners pray for the gate and the arrows as you and I might pray for heaven.

“Seeing the danger, my brother and I — he rules over the northern part of our clan as my representative — sought to combine the other clans ere they were overcome, while yet our own people still held stanch. But our efforts had no result, save that we incurred the greater hatred of the chief Shaman — if, indeed, his hatred could increase.

“But since we are a strong and warlike people, and since our folk, although in many ways independent and loving not at all any control, still hold to us, and are gifted with much sound sense in that they believe little of the talk of the Shaman spies, the Shamans have not so far dared to make open war upon us.

“But they only wait their time, which, I think, draws near, now that the last of the Green Sakae chiefs has gone down.

“Aryenis has told you somewhat of how she came to be taken prisoner, when she was staying with the old chief, and I had been called away. The party who sacked the palace were partly Brown Sakae raiders, partly Shamans, and these latter took her and the old man to their master.

“Looking upon Aryenis with lustful eyes he desired her, but, further, he wished to use her for other ends by marrying her as a political move. He has already a wife and other

women, but among the Shamans this would be no obstacle, and doubtless to placate the feelings of the pagan Sakae, who hold, like us, that a man should have but one wife, he would have divorced his other one.

"But Aryenis, as you may have noticed, has a swift tongue and a swift brain, and she spoke to him as he deserved. He is deformed and hideous of person, and, among other things, she told him she would rather wed with a real vulture than with a misshapen one that called itself a man.

"For all his cunning he has an ungovernable temper with regard to his personal appearance. Being more cruel than lustful when beside himself with rage, he sent her down to the gate then and there chained to the old chief, who was to be slain at once. He told Aryenis that when she had lived with vultures awhile she could tell him how she liked it, and then perhaps he would be pitiful and give what the vultures left of her to his archers to play with."

I could hear Stephnos's teeth grit as he fingered his dagger-hilt. I hoped keenly to be there when he met the chief Shaman. At least, I did and I didn't. I was somehow beginning to feel that no one should meet that beauty until I had interviewed him.

"And then you came and saved her. It was two days before I got the news, and, hastily gathering such men as I had ready, I rode straight into the Brown Sakae country where the hills begin — a maze of mountains ere you reach the Shamans' hold. Being but few in number, we were driven back with loss, so that I had to return. My brother was raising his folk and the balance of mine to come and aid me when you appeared. We had intended to try and reach the Shamans' fortress, and, if we could not save my daughter, at least avenge her or die in the effort.

"Now, however, there is no such need for haste since she is safe. But instead I feel, and my brother writes to me the same, that we must strike the enemy soon, or else allow them to destroy the whole country. Therefore, have I sent out to all my head men to meet me at our chief town to discuss

the question of making immediate war upon the Shamans once for all.

"The carrying-off of Aryenis has stirred the country-side, and the folk realize that the danger threatens all, and I have great hope that they will agree. If so we will raise our whole armed strength. War will come whether we make it or whether we wait for attack, and it is better that we should make it now rather than wait till our enemies are still stronger.

"But in this strife the foe will be two to one, maybe three to one, against us. And it will be such war as we have never had, for once the Shamans cease their pretence of peace, they will give us war such as the fiend conceives it.

"Now, say, knowing all, will you stay and fight with us, or will you take such things as you require for your journey, together with tokens of our gratitude, and return to your own land? I hide not from you that we shall be in a hard case, and that in the end we may be overrun, when such of us as are left alive will go through the gate, after the Shamans have played with us awhile in their fashion, which is not pleasant.

"Do you go or stay?"

He looked at us, his chin on his hand. I could see the boy nursing his dagger-hilt, his eyes on my face. My mind required no making up. The idea of Aryenis once more in the Shamans' hands admitted of no compromise. I turned to the old man and said, and in saying it altered the whole course of my life:

"Sir, since the matter touches the Lady Aryenis, who has honoured us by being our guest for some days, and since I like not the manners of those who dwell in the Shamans' gates, I shall remain with you."

Then, pulling out my pistol, I held out the butt to him, as he had done with his sword.

He touched the grip, and I could see a look of pleasure in his face.

"One is doubly strong when a brave man joins one. Sir Harilek, I thank you again."

He looked at Wrexham and Forsyth, who said nothing, but held out their pistols.

As Kyrlos touched them, he rose to his feet.

"It draws late now, my guests. I will tell my daughter that she was right. She said of a surety you would join us, for you were clearly all clean brave men. *That* she knew, since you showed her greater consideration even than if she had been your own sister, and your men treated her as if she were a princess, whereas she came to you a helpless captive. It seems that in your country you bring up men to treat women as they should do, which is sometimes rare."

"It had somewhat to do with our late war, this matter of how women should be treated," said Forsyth. "Many folk came to the war who might have stayed away because of the indignities which the enemy put upon the women of the countries he invaded."

Kyrlos and his son led us to our room, and saw that we had all we wanted before they left us.

As I pulled off my boots I said to Wrexham: "Well, we seem to have stepped into a pretty little kind of war all ready-made. I wonder if a Shaman is anything like a Hun. Their ways are not very dissimilar."

"As you say. It would take a particularly unpleasant type to think of chaining a live girl to a dead man for the vultures to play with while he sat and looked on from the upper storey." He spat into the fireplace. "Gives one a bad taste in one's mouth, doesn't it? I shall look forward to meeting the chief Shaman."

Forsyth was silent, and I could see that he was pondering over something. At last he spoke.

"Whatever these people are, they aren't Greeks for all that Aryenis and her father and some of their friends speak Greek. But the other men's speech is a totally different language, although there were some Greek words in it, or what sounded like them. They look more like Scandinavians, somewhat sunburnt."

"Yes, that's the way they struck me," I replied. "You

remember Kyrlos talked of Greeks coming into the country as though they were quite a different race."

"Well, we shall have every opportunity of studying them now. I must get hold of their real speech and see if I can place it." Forsyth turned into his blankets. "I wonder what kind of a show the war will be."

"Middle Ages for a cert," said Wrexham. "I wonder if the Shamans' front door is anything like their back one? If so, I wish I had a few bags of blasting-powder or a box or two of guncotton or ammonal. Otherwise, I rather visualize Kyrlos's troops sitting down in front of it with wooden towers, and wet hides, and all the usual accessories one reads of in Virgil, and not getting very much farther."

"That means to say that it's merely a question of starving them out, then."

"Yes, or else some kind of treachery, or a Trojan wooden horse stunt. I wonder if there's any nitre in the country?" He was turning over the pages of a sort of compendium book he had made up while we were fitting out in Calcutta, and which never left his valise. It contained, I think, every known recipe for the manufacture of what Wrexham comprehensively but vaguely referred to as "engineer stores." "Also phosphorus?"

"What's the phosphorus wanted for?" I asked.

"Matches, dear man, matches. We've not many left, and the Sakae flint and steel doesn't attract my cultured taste."

"Do you propose to start a match-factory for the benefit of the inhabitants?"

"Perhaps. That and other things even more useful. I don't think I shall want to hurry home. This is going to be an amusing experience, I fancy."

"No. I can't say I want to hurry home either. The war will probably take two or three months, and after that I should like to explore the country and study the people and the language. Also, I want to see if the beautiful Euphrosine is anything like her picture. Did Aryenis tell you where she was?"

Forsyth was rather keen on what I annoyed him by referring to as the Euphrosine myth. Since my conversation with Aryenis below the cliffs, however, and Euphrosine's materialization into a real living person and a friend of Aryenis, I had had to admit that my classing her as a myth was unjustifiable.

"No. But I expect we'll meet her in a day or two."

"Well, we shall be here most of the winter, and it's not much good going back till well on next year, so there's lots of time to look round," said the doctor as he turned in. "I'm for sleep now, however."

"If the place is what it seems to be, a year is mighty little to explore it," said Wrexham. "I'm inclined to think that several years would not be too much. It's a sort of Middle Ages Europe tucked away into the heart of Asia, by the little we've seen."

As he put out the light and we settled down to sleep, I also felt that it would want more than a year or so to explore. Indeed, I was beginning to think that even the matter of Aryenis would require a lifetime. She is so intensely vivid, and has a knack of hanging about your mind and popping up at odd moments just when you're trying to go to sleep, or lazily contemplating the smoke of your pipe. And once Aryenis did slide into your mental vision — well, everything else seemed to slide out. The desert and the camels and the long road back through Kashgaria, the hills and the high passes, got dimmer and dimmer in perspective, and the Bombay or Karachi docks refused to be visualized at all when Aryenis's eyes and her mouth and her red-gold hair entered — as of right — into what up till then I had always considered as *my* mind.

CHAPTER XIV

WE VISIT THE BORDER

WE slept late next morning, and I was awakened by the men moving in our room. Dressing hurriedly, we went into the dining-hall to find Kyrlos and Stephnos. Aryenis was evidently enjoying to the full the delights of a real bed in a real house once more.

We made a short meal, for the Sakae live much as do the Southern Europeans — a light meal of bread and wine, with perhaps eggs the first thing in the morning, and a large breakfast at noon. I must say I longed for tea or some other suitable morning drink. Alcohol at that hour savoured too much of the rum with which we used to lace our cocoa for dawn battle stunts in the bad frozen frontier days to have any pleasant memories.

Kyrlos asked us how we had slept, and if we had all we wanted. We said we were more than comfortable in a good bed — their beds were good — after many weeks of hard marching. Firoz and Payindah were feeding with the soldiers, so we told Kyrlos of their prejudices in the matter of pork, and he said he would give orders on the point.

The Punjabis hit it off very well with the Sakae, whose mode of life was not unlike their own in many respects. In time they picked up some of the language with that facility which characterizes the people of India, accustomed all their lives to meeting men of different races. Some folk are of the idea that the inhabitants of India are one people, which may account for a lot of the idealistic rubbish we hear about the Indian nation. One might as well talk of the European nation. There is far more difference between the Punjabi and the Tamil than there is between the Russian and the Englishman, while the French are more akin to the Scotch than are the Mahrattas to the Sikhs. One meets more variety of

languages, customs, religions, and, most of all, races, in India than in traversing Europe from Moscow to Dublin.

I asked where all the others had gone, and Kyrlos told me that they had ridden out to the villages to see the levies, and would be back with reports in the evening.

He said that he would be riding out himself directly to one of the border forts that covered an entry into his country, and asked if we would care to come. Wrexham and I said we should like very much to have a look at the country, but Forsyth announced that he intended to stop behind and learn something of the local language from Aryenis. He spent a very useful day, and when we came back he had long lists of words of some unknown language written out in Greek characters with the Greek equivalents.

Aryenis was evidently a good scholar, and Forsyth is a born linguist. He picked up their language amazingly quickly. As he had thought, it was not Greek at base, though there were many Greek words interlarded, especially as spoken by the more educated.

Much of the official written language was Greek, somewhat debased but comprehensible, and we discovered that a knowledge of the old tongue was a common possession of the upper classes, much as was Latin in mediæval Europe. He said the original language was quite unfamiliar to him, but had many and unmistakable traits pointing to its being some old Aryan dialect.

After we had finished the morning meal, horses were brought round for us, little stocky animals of the class of a small heavy-weight polo pony. The bridles were of deep leather, with single reins and a snaffle bit. The saddles were merely quilted pads with leather surcingles, and rather narrow stirrups, but comfortable enough to ride on.

The Sakae gave us the impression of a people to whom horses were a means of locomotion rather than a form of sport. But later we introduced polo, which was a *succès fou* among the young bloods.

As we rode out of the belt of trees surrounding the house

and outbuildings, we had our first real view of the country, which seemed to consist of a succession of valleys and ridges of hill, some steep and rocky, others more rolling, and covered with trees and verdure.

To our right lay hills, range after range climbing away to where the great snow peaks filled the sky in the north, above the shimmering blue-grey slopes below. The air was cold and clear under the vivid blue sky, and a little breeze rustled the autumn foliage, splashes of warm colour in the bright sunshine. The track we followed sloped steadily down for a mile or so, and then up again on to a long ridge of hills higher than the ground we had left.

To our left, beyond a long expanse of more or less open plain, dotted with fields and cultivation as far as eye could see, were masses of sharp-toothed hills, clustering higher and higher in the direction we had seen the gate. Stephnos pointed it out to us as the Shaman country. I suppose the near edge was thirty miles distant.

The hillsides we rode over were fertile-looking soil, terraced in many places, like the terraces one sees all along the hills of the Italian Riviera, sprinkled with stone-walled orchards and vineyards, the trees now in the copper and bronze of autumn leaf, and dotted among them little villages, small clusters of grey stone houses, and some mud-built huts.

The houses were small and primitive-looking, but of a distinctly higher stamp than one sees in many parts of Middle Asia.

We passed through one hamlet, and as we rode by the women flocked out of the houses with an old man or two to touch Kyrlos's bridle and speak to him. Fine-looking women most of them, typical peasantry of undoubted white stock. There were none there as dark as a Southern Italian, and the majority of them had light-coloured hair, while all had light-coloured eyes. With them a swarm of children, flaxen hair and red cheeks, that made me homesick for Sussex.

The women were all clad in rough homespun woollen garments, short full skirts, and bodices with short sleeves end-

ing above the elbows. Some were barefooted, but the majority had heavy sandals with wooden soles. For the most part they were bareheaded, their hair coiled in thick plaits on either side of the head, and some — the more well-to-do — wore heavy necklaces of silver and turquoise, a favourite stone in the country. One I noticed had clasps of similar make in her hair.

This woman was, I fancy, the wife of the head man of the village, because she did most of the talking with Kyrlos.

It was refreshing to see women coming up and talking to men in this way after years spent in countries where the women sit with half-veiled faces in the background as you ride by.

They were evidently anxious, from the way they talked — not surprising, for, as we found a little later, we were but five miles from the border of the Brown Sakae.

They looked at us curiously, our clothes being obviously unfamiliar. The head woman asked Kyrlos who we were, and he told her that we were the people who had brought Aryenis back. They had heard of her return the evening before, the news having gone through that bit of the country like wildfire, for Aryenis was beloved of every man, woman, and child in the place. They took stock of us unabashed thereafter, and, I think, made remarks on our personal appearances.

I asked Stephnos why there were so few men about, and he told me that they had been called up to the fort to which we were riding, to guard the frontier.

As we rode on again between the silver birch trees lining the road, he explained to me that they had but a small army for police and frontier work against raiders from other clans. Raids were not infrequent even in peace-time. Small affairs as a rule, however, which were frequently stopped for years together by mutual consent. His father's regular troops amounted to some two thousand men, including those under his uncle in the northern part of their country.

But all able-bodied men were liable to military service for

fourteen days in the year, and in case of invasion or threat of invasion for as long as required. He said we should see the men of this district when we got to the fort, which lay on the far side of the hill up which we were riding.

As we came over the crest, riding through fields of lucerne, Stephnos pointed out to me a big winding river that ran below us in a wide valley perhaps six miles and more across, and at the foot, some two miles away, a low, square fort on a small hillock jutting up sheer above the river.

As we drew nearer, we could see the glint of the sun on the sentries' caps just above the parapets, and from the top of a little central tower a blue flag waved in the breeze.

Below the fort was a little village with one or two shops. Most of the buildings were, however, shut up, clear evidence of prospective war.

Our ponies clattered up the steep winding path to the fort through a narrow gateway on the edge of a precipitous drop. Two sentries clashed the iron butts of their short spears to the ground as we entered (Kyrlos had sent one of our escort ahead to warn them of our approach), and at the inner gate we found the captain of the fort waiting to greet us, a tall broad man in close-mail jerkin and steel cap, with a silver device let in in front. Kyrlos introduced him to us, and he saluted each of us in turn; but, when he heard that I was the man who had rescued Aryenis, he offered me the hilt of his sword. I owe a lot of stout friends to Aryenis, it seems. He was a quiet, determined-looking man, his natural good looks somewhat marred by an ugly gash across the forehead, which gave one eyelid rather a droop.

But his mouth was straight and honest, and I think a man's mouth is the best index to his character, although his eyes may show more of passing emotions. I liked him then and there — his square-chinned bronzed face with the short yellow-brown moustache under the slightly aquiline nose, his steady blue-grey eyes looking straight out below the dark rim of his grey steel cap under which his bobbed yellow locks just showed, all gave one the impression of a leader of

men. His name was Henga, and we learnt that he was the younger son of a big landholder in the district. Among the Sakae it is customary for the regular troops to be officered by the sons of the smaller chiefs from whose districts the men are drawn, forming thus to some extent a professional officer class.

We dismounted from our ponies, and, while Kyrlos was conferring with Henga, Stephnos showed us round the fort with its high stone walls and battlements, and the quarters for the garrison and the storerooms all along the lower part.

He said there was a chain of such forts along the frontier, covering the most important entries into the country.

Each had its garrison of from fifty to one hundred regulars, and formed the centre of resistance for the surrounding countryside. When danger threatened, the officer in charge could call up the men of the district in such numbers as he required, either to defend the fort, or to hold the frontier, or to deal with raiders.

Each fort contained food and war stores, arrows and the like, for two months for twice its normal garrison. When men were called up for service, they had to join with four days' food, a bow, a sword, axe or knife, and a cloak or sleeping-rug.

As we climbed on to the battlements he pointed out below us a company of men manœuvring, and said these were some of the men called up. The others, in small bands under the leadership of regulars, were watching the frontier up to where they linked with the next fort garrison some ten miles away.

I asked if all the clans had this system of military service, and he said that all had something like it; but for the last two years his father and uncle, feeling that war was inevitable, had been perfecting that of the Blue Sakae.

The regular companies had a very high percentage — in some cases fifty per cent — of what they call "double-pay men" (what we should call N.C.O.'s), who were specially trained, and drew double pay for their efficiency. Most of

these were used to command the local levies in time of emergency. Thus expansion for war was easy with a nucleus of trained leaders. Living in the same districts, they were in touch with the civil population, and knew the men whom they would command in war.

Men were not paid when called up for service, their military service being part return for their lands, all of which belonged in theory to the chiefs, although, as long as the owner paid his taxes, and — in the case of able-bodied men — rendered his military service, he could not be dispossessed. Thus land passed down from generation to generation in the same family.

In the case of old or disabled men, women, or minor children who held land, the full tax had to be paid, while in other cases the amount of tax due was reduced by a proportion for each day of military service rendered. In the frontier districts, in addition to the normal fourteen days, each village was collectively responsible for turning out to repel and pursue raiders. For this no individual reduction of tax was made, but the whole taxes of the frontier districts were assessed more lightly.

I did not glean all this on the afternoon I am describing, but I mention it now so as to give a clearer picture of the country.

I climbed up to the battlements with Stephnos and stood by the sentry, who, with his long bow beside him, was gazing out over the country in front. There were other sentries farther along, one to each face of the fort.

It reminded me very much of a frontier post on the Indian border — the same loopholes, the same keen-eyed, Greek-profiled sentries, the same hills in front shimmering in the bright sunlight. But the country was far richer than anything along the Punjab frontier — more akin, indeed, to an English countryside than anything I have ever seen in the East.

In front toward the west stretched the plain we had seen from above, with the broad river winding its slow way

through the rich fields into the fertile valley behind us, and then in the distance the fantastic, pinnacled, rocky hills of the Shaman country.

Stephnos pointed out a little irrigation canal some three quarters of a mile away, which he said was the boundary in these parts. I saw few people moving in the fields, and he explained that nearly all had withdrawn behind the line of forts.

To northward, beyond the river, lay a row of hills and a mass of undulating country, well cultivated by the look of it. The country all round here was in the main watered by the Astara, which, taking its rise from the high snow, came down first as a fairly fast mountain stream, and then, as the gradients got less, moved slower and slower, till it meandered through this part of the country, sluggish as an English stream in the Midlands.

Stephnos said that this was the richest valley in the country, and perhaps one of the causes of the jealousy of the enemy. But the Green Sakae country was almost as fertile; indeed, nowhere was the land really poor save the part of the Brown Sakae country round the Shamans' territory, which we found later was in a way industrial, possessing metal mines which were worked. In consequence the Shamans were well off, being able to dispose of their metal-work for whatever they needed in the way of grain and other land produce.

There were other metal-workers in the country and one or two small mines, but the Shamans were reputed the best craftsmen, and their wares commanded a high price. They were particularly noted for their weapons and armour.

Before we left, Henga took us down to see the men drilling below. They were camped on an open space under the fort, some two hundred men in all.

They were of the same type as we had seen at Kyrlos's house, save, of course, their equipment was somewhat sketchy. But every one had the long bow, which we discovered to be the national weapon. Most of them had some

form of body protection, either leather jerkins, some covered with loose metal rings sewn on; some plain, or else thick wadded vests which might turn a blow. Not a few had steel caps; the remainder had close-fitting, thick wadded ones. I noticed that these last — although of harder and stronger material and of different colour — were practically indistinguishable in shape from the caps worn in the Punjab Salt Range, slightly peaked, straight round the brow, with low ear-pieces sweeping round to the back.

Almost every one of these caps was oversewn with either strips of metal rings or short lengths of iron chain.

It was easy to pick out the regulars, who were more or less uniformly dressed, all having mail jerkin and steel cap. The N.C.O.'s had small brass stars fastened to the front of their headgear.

Kyrlos chatted with some of the older men, and one could see that he was a popular ruler, for, although there was none of the exaggerated respect so common in the East, it was clear from his people's bearing that they looked upon him as their natural leader.

I noticed that he shook hands with all and sundry on meeting them, and I put down his position as very much that of the patriarch of the tribe, an impression that later observations confirmed. Every one was free, and had the right of free speech where he considered himself aggrieved; but this freedom was tempered with a certain respect for those in authority, provided they stuck to the laws and — what was even more important — the customs of the land.

As we rode home, I remarked to Kyrlos that, save for the gathering of men, it all seemed very peaceful, and he said that that was because both sides were preparing for war — at least they thought the Shamans were preparing. For some days yet there would be nothing except minor raids here and there and perhaps but few of those. It took time to collect men and form them. His main forces were collecting at Miletis, where his brother had gone to supervise things.

“To-morrow we shall ride halfway there, some sixteen miles

to Aornos, a fortified town. Then next day we will ride on and meet my brother, whose army by now will be reaching Miletis."

As he was speaking, we passed three men — obviously called up for service — on their way back to the fort, and I noticed that all three wore something in their caps. One had a tassel of floss silk, another a little square talisman of turquoise, the third a gay-coloured bunch of ribbons.

"What are these things in their caps, Kyrlos?" said I.

He looked at them to see what I meant.

"Oh, that is a custom of our land. Whenever there is war and the men are called out, their wives or their sweethearts give them some favour to wear."

"And if a man have neither wife nor sweetheart?"

"Then he must go ask some maid to give him a favour; or sometimes" — he chuckled — "it has been known, when a young fellow is rather bashful, that the maid herself will fling him one as he marches away."

"And is he thereby tied to anything?"

"By no means, though frequently such things lead to more. But it is good when a wifeless man goes out to fight that he should have some special maid to think of. He is the more anxious to dispose of the enemy quickly and so come home again.

"If nothing comes of it when he returns, there is no harm. But if he return wearing a maiden's favour and seek her out, he knows that she is not unwilling if her favour has been bravely borne in battle.

"The thought of a pair of white arms and red lips will make a man fight better than the thought of all the gold and honours in the land. Is it not so also in your country?"

"Indeed, I think it is somewhat this way the world over, and will be while men are men and women are women, though I have heard folk talk as though such things were dead and gone, and that women preferred gold and luxury to strong arms and brave hearts.

"Which talk must be untrue, since the thing that every

woman desires in her secret heart more than all else beside is to bring forth straight-limbed children after the mould of their father: she does not desire to beget money-bags. Hence unless her nature be warped will she seek rather a clean-souled, strong-limbed man to father her children. Therefore I like to see my folk wearing their women's favours. It is an omen for the generations to come."

It was clear that Kyrlos and his kind had a refreshingly primitive outlook on life. I should like to have put him up to argue with a pacifist eugenist such as seem to swarm at home just now.

He was silent a space, and then he turned to me again.

"You said last night that you and your friends were wifeless men. It seems strange to me, for in our country it is uncommon that men of your years should be unwed. You are all close on thirty, I should say, while our folk marry mostly at twenty-five or six. Is the custom of your country other?"

"We marry somewhat later, Kyrlos. In our country it requires money to support wife and children, and but few young men have it. Further, since many of us wander much in strange parts, it comes that we marry later."

"It seems impolitic that such a matter should depend on gold, for surely the State must suffer when men like you and your friends remain single."

"But perhaps, O Kyrlos, we have not met with such as we would marry, or perhaps those whom we would marry would not have us! With us it is the woman who decides rather than the man."

"With us also. It is not so in all lands?"

"In many it is otherwise, or so they say. Often it is the girl's parents, and in some countries the parents of both, who settle these matters."

"That is bad, methinks; such things should be for the man and for the woman. But I should be grieved to think of seeing Stephnos at your thirty years and still unwed."

"Thirty-two — O Kyrlos. But, if I had been married, doubtless I should have remained at home, and then maybe

the Lady Aryenis would not be with you now, so perhaps our customs have some value upon occasion."

"Doubtless, my friend; all things are well planned could we but see ahead."

Then he changed the subject, and for the rest of our ride back talked of the coming war. I could see that at heart his cares lay heavy upon him for all his cheerful talk to his people.

After a lazy afternoon spent with Aryenis looking round the grounds and asking questions about the country, we had an early evening meal, for Kyrlos had announced that we should start very early the next day. Aryenis went to bed soon after dinner, and we followed her example, since Kyrlos was busy hearing the reports of his officers back from the districts.

Before we went to bed, Payindah and Firoz plied us with questions as to the exact relationship between the Sakae and Sikandar, and hence with themselves. We gathered that they had settled down most comfortably, and Payindah in particular was the hero of the soldiers, since Aryenis had explained his share in her escape. Like all Punjabis, he was not devoid of swagger, and his locks were new-curled and oiled, and his leather new-cleaned, while I remarked that he had obtained a silk fringe for the end of his *pagri*.

During the afternoon they had accompanied some of the soldiers into the neighbouring village, where they had been the guests of the day, and referred with some gusto to the excellent sherbet that had been given to them. I fear their ignorance of the language misled them in the matter of the country white wine.

They were full of praise of the rich land they had seen, comparing it with France. Firoz, in fact, wondered whether it would be possible to take up a bit of it, and his eyes glistened as he described the flourishing countryside.

They considered the people as almost as good as their own folk, though how on earth they managed to converse with them I don't know. Still no good fighting man is ever at a

loss how to make himself at home, and these two hard-bitten, war-seasoned, hereditary soldiers were no exception to the general rule, as I knew from past experience.

Payindah's handling of a portly French farm-wife and the resultant delicacies which appeared in my company mess in consequence in the muddy days of 1914-15 still linger in my memory as bright spots upon an otherwise murky horizon. So doubtless he had no difficulty in explaining his meaning to the Sakae, even more akin to the peasant soldier of the Northern Punjab than were the stalwart peasantry of Northern France.

CHAPTER XV

WE SPEAK WITH AN ENVOY AND RIDE TO AORNOS

NEXT morning we found the whole place astir, horses outside ready saddled, and pack-animals waiting to be loaded. Aryenis was dressed in riding-clothes, a sort of long coat like the first appearance of the divided skirt before women took to the simple breeches and coat they wear so much nowadays, when nearly all ride astride.

Payindah and Firoz had packed most of our stuff overnight, and what little was left they finished while we breakfasted. As we came out, I noticed how shabby the two Punjabis' travel-worn kit looked compared to the clothing of the men around, though these were in their war gear, and I said to Aryenis that I hoped we should be able to refit soon, as we were all pretty disreputable.

"When we get to Miletis you will find clothes all right, Harilek; but you will have to wear those of our people, I think, unless you desire especially that your own should be copied."

We got to horse and started down the same track we had followed the previous day. As we set out, I saw Firoz and Payindah riding two stout ponies, with their rifles slung, and carrying ours at the saddle-bow. Forsyth's rifle was borne by one of the soldiers, who was displaying the wonderful weapon to his friends, very proud of the trust reposed in him.

I noticed, hanging on Payindah's saddle, the steel cap Wrexham had recovered from the man I killed at the gate, and took it from him to look at it again, for it was of curious workmanship, and more ornate than the usual type. Evidently the late owner was a person of quality among the Shamans.

We had ridden perhaps a mile — I was talking to Aryenis

— when from up the path in front of us dashed a man on a small pony, a regular soldier by his dress. He pulled up his beast, and, saluting Kyrlos, handed him a paper which Kyrlos read and then called to me.

“Harilek, I hear from Henga, whom you met yesterday, that there is an envoy from the Shamans arrived at his fort. The manner of his letter puts me in some doubt, and I would ride there and speak with the man. If your friends will accompany Aryenis to Aornos, we will take a few men and push on.”

I could see that the others would have liked to come, too, but, since Kyrlos did not suggest it, they said nothing.

“We shall meet you at Aornos in the afternoon when I have heard what the Shamans have to say,” said Kyrlos to them. Then to me: “I think it would be well to bring that man of yours with us. He was with you in the gate, and perhaps he will be useful.”

So I beckoned up Payindah, telling him to ride with us.

Six of Kyrlos’s mounted bowmen accompanied us, and, waving to the rest of the party, we trotted on down the path. For a time Kyrlos said nothing. He seemed to be thinking.

Then, when we pulled our horses to a walk as we crossed the valley and breasted the hill in front, he turned to me and said:

“It seems that perchance the Shamans do not know of Aryenis’s return, nor that I know how the old chief was killed, for Henga writes that this envoy comes from the Shamans to express their sorrow at my daughter’s death at the hands of the Brown Sakae, and to invite me to their country to see justice done on the murderers. Therefore, he has said nothing to them about her escape.

“There is clearly some plot, though as yet I cannot see what is intended. But since they say that Aryenis is dead, we will say naught at first and let them speak.”

“Do you think they wish to throw the blame on others so as to patch up peace?”

“Not merely to patch up peace, for I know they have

sought war this long time. But I think they hope to kill me and others of our chiefs, so that our people, being as sheep without a shepherd, may fall the easier into their hands. But we shall know more when we hear what they have to say. Come, we have a long ride to-day." He kicked his horse to a canter as the slope became less steep.

Half an hour later saw us in sight of the fort, and presently, riding through the little village, we found Henga with a strong guard behind him waiting for us below the fort gate.

"The Shaman envoy is out on the open space," he said as he greeted us. "I fear treachery, and all my men above are at their stations. But I know not what the plan may be, for the envoy has but a dozen men, though all well horsed."

"Is he alone?" asked Kyrlos, as we dismounted.

"No. Besides the envoy there is Atana, the chief Shaman's nephew, whom you remember at the last council when I commanded your escort, sir: one against whom I have a score to pay; an evil-looking man of bad repute even among the Shamans. The envoy I know not."

Kyrlos looked at me.

"Those clothes of yours are noticeable, Harilek. I think we will change them. Henga, send a man for a spare set of yours and a mail shirt from the armoury."

Within ten minutes or so I was arrayed in a suit of Henga's clothes, which, barring being a shade loose, for he was a broader man than I, fitted me well. The mail jerkin he gave me was light and comfortable, while the steel cap fitted reasonably, and was lighter than the battle bowler one wore in old days.

I told Payindah to conceal his rifle in his *poshtin*, and to keep among Henga's men out of sight of the Shamans. Just as we were starting, Kyrlos seemed to remember something, and told me to bring the steel helmet we had taken in the gate, but to keep it hidden for the present.

We passed through the camp below the fort, and on the far side of the open space beyond it saw a dozen men standing by their horses. From the cut of their clothing it was

clear to me that these must be the envoy's party. In the centre of the parade-ground a willow branch was set up, which I discovered later was the sign that there was truce for four hundred paces around. This was the custom when envoys came in time of war.

Kyrlos, Henga, and I walked out to the willow branch, and then Henga called upon the Shaman envoy to deliver his message.

From the group opposite three men advanced, two of them the most sinister-looking fellows it had been my fortune to meet for some time.

The first was the envoy himself, a dark man clad in a short black surcoat and black steel cap. He appeared to be unarmed, and carried an unshod white arrow in his hand.

Behind him walked two others, both mail-clad with the same black steel caps, but armed. The custom of Sakae truce meetings is that each man carries his sword, but that bows may not be brought within arrow-shot of the speaking place.

Also, unless peace is made, the visiting party rides straight away after the conference. This I mention, because, the moment the three came over, I saw the rest girthing up their mounts, and asked Kyrlos the meaning. As he told me, he said, "Do not speak any more at present. I wish them to think you one of my officers."

They halted three paces from us.

Then Kyrlos, speaking in Greek, asked their mission. Some of the more formal speech was in Greek, which I was able to follow. The rest was in their own language, which Kyrlos translated to me later. There was a certain difference between the Shaman dialect and that of the Blue Sakae, and it was therefore customary, if either party so desired, to carry out conversations of this sort in the old tongue, and I think Kyrlos opened in Greek in order that I might be able to understand.

I will give the drift of the envoy's speech.

"Lord Kyrlos! The chief Shaman, speaking by my mouth,

sends greetings and great sorrow at the death of your daughter at the hands of certain evilly disposed men of the Brown Sakae. When the south section of the Green Sakae rose against their chief, he and your daughter, by great misfortune, came into the hands of Brown Sakae robbers, who slew them while they sought refuge on our border. And having slain them, they burnt the bodies lest their deed should be discovered. My master, the chief Shaman, was full of grief when he received the news, and forthwith sent men, of whom Atana was one, to capture the murderers, so that they might pass into the gate after judgment had been executed in your presence.

"But, alas! certain equally evil ones reported to you that our people were concerned in this foul deed, so that next we heard that you had taken up arms and were preparing for war.

"Therefore my master sent me in haste to speak with you, exposing the true state of affairs, and praying you come with us that you might see with your own eyes that fit punishment was duly inflicted upon the murderers.

"For my master seeks not war, but peace. He desires the liberty and happiness of all men, and it grieves him much that, while the other clans have joined with him, you alone with your brother remain away from the council, where he plans the well-being of all the Sakae, and instead prepare your people for war, which war, indeed, can lead to naught but your destruction, for we are many and you are but the one clan.

"Therefore he prays you cease these warlike preparations, and ride with us to see justice done, bringing, if you desire, as proof of our good faith, a company of your own men, and letting the rest of your folk return to their homes.

"Of his great regret he will speak more anon. Words are idle things in the face of such sorrow as yours, but my master hopes that, when you speak with him face to face, he will better be able to express the grief that has come upon him at your great misfortune."

The envoy ceased, and I must say I gasped at the cool effrontery of it all.

But Kyrlos stood silent, smoothing his chin reflectively, a trick he has when thinking deeply.

"This is grievous news ye bring, though I feared, indeed, that my daughter and her host were dead. And, as you say, it was reported to me that certain of your people had slain them. Atana, you say, went out to bring in the murderers?"

Atana stepped forward. He was the taller of the two who accompanied the envoy. His face seemed to me slightly Mongolian in type, though fair-skinned. There was a certain upward trend in the eyes that gave me the impression. And his mouth was one of the cruellest I have ever seen in a man.

"Yes, Lord Kyrlos. Taking certain of my men, I rode out into the hills, and we came upon the evildoers in the act of dividing your daughter's things. As they resisted us, some were slain on the spot, others we took; and after the chief Shaman had questioned them, as is his wont, we put them aside for judgment until you should come."

"And the bodies of the old chief and of my daughter were burnt, you say?"

"It grieves me greatly to have to say this thing, but so it was, Lord Kyrlos. I examined the place myself, and we found the charred remains of a man and a woman, and there were certain pieces of garments which we brought with us in case there was any doubt."

From a small bag he produced some charred fragments of cloth, which he handed to Kyrlos.

Kyrlos examined them closely. "Undoubtedly," said he slowly and sadly. "That piece of embroidery I remember well on my daughter's dress."

I think the Shaman envoy thought he had carried the day.

"Therefore will I certainly ride into your country and see justice done upon the murderers, even as your master suggests.

"But first there is a small matter I would speak of. There

came to me a certain man, who said that the old chief and my daughter were seen near your master's fortress — nay, even that they were seen at the Gate of Death. The man went further, and said that he saw the old chief slain there, even as those guilty of great crimes and sentenced by the whole council are put to death."

"He lied," said the envoy. "Have we not proven to you how the real facts are?"

"But stay; he went even further, and said that my daughter was seen there, bound also in shameful fashion."

"He lies again, doubtless desiring to stir up strife between you and my master. No man has ever been in sight of the gate save those who die and those of my master's guards who slay."

"So I thought, but he said that, after the old chief had been killed, a certain strange man rushed in and carried away my daughter, and while so doing slew some of your folk in strange fashion with a noise."

I saw the envoy's jaw drop, and I wondered if he had been at the loopholes when Payindah was sniping them. He collected himself, and was about to reply, when Kyrlos stopped him and went on:

"And to convince me he brought proof, firstly bringing my daughter alive and well."

That really stupefied them. Like the Sakae, they had no knowledge of any way into their country except the gate, and thought that, if we were men and not evil spirits, we must have carried off Aryenis into the desert. The last thing they ever imagined was that she had been brought back to her own people. And so doubtless they hoped to put the blame on to raiders, and then, by inducing Kyrlos to cease his preparations, to fall upon him unawares, even if they were not able to inveigle him into their country, where they would murder him and his men.

Before the envoy could speak again, Kyrlos took the helmet from my hand, unwrapped it, and threw it down at their feet, saying:

"And there is the helmet of one of the murderers, with upon it the device of the chief Shaman's guard, brought by the man who slew him, he who stands here now" — and he indicated me.

Then he went on. "Therefore will I ride before long into your country to do justice. But I will not ride with a company of my men. I will ride with all my people; and when I come to the Shaman fortress, I will gorge the vultures in the gate, and their last and fittest meal shall be your master's heart." He pointed to the nearly leafless trees. "Tell him that sent you that I swear by God, that, before the spring buds show, he and his friends shall lie out in the Gate of Death and the land be purged of the Shaman curse that we have suffered these late years.

"Go. You have my leave to depart."

But, as the envoy turned to go, Atana, whose face was convulsed with rage, spoke up.

"Your message shall be delivered, and, as you say, the vultures shall be gorged before spring. But we will feed you to them slowly, so that you may see how white-skinned Aryenis likes living with me and my archers in the gate. We rejoice that she is not dead, for the kept women there lack variety, and it went to my heart when my uncle bade me put her out of the gate so soon, and waste such pleasing charms ere we had tasted them a space."

I wonder Kyrlos did not kill him then, but apparently it was a crime beyond all words to touch an envoy or his party.

But Henga stepped up to him, and, looking into his face, said slowly:

"For that, and for other things you know of, I, Henga, when next I meet you, will kill you with these two hands. Now, go quickly, lest I kill you here."

Atana looked at him, apparently recognizing him for the first time, then spat on the ground:

"So 'tis Henga, the cousin of the sweet and easy lady my brother fancied so. 'Tis sad she died so young."

And, with a mocking laugh, he turned to follow the others.

Then occurred a thing unparalleled in the history of the Sakae, who consider an envoy's truce most sacred. Suddenly turning, Atana flung his dagger straight at Kyrlos's throat, and then fled for his life to the horses. It missed its mark by a bare inch, tearing through the leather collar of Kyrlos's under-jerkin, just over the mail, ripping a long, though luckily not deep, gash at the base of his neck.

The thing was clearly premeditated, for his men were in the saddle as he did it, and two of them dashed forward with his horse. Before the bowmen above us could loose string, the whole lot of the Shamans, bending low in their saddles, were out of arrow-shot away across country as hard as they could go.

But they had reckoned without Payindah. As Kyrlos staggered back against me, Payindah whipped his rifle from under his *poshtin* and opened fire. He brought down three of them before they were out of range, and the second was Atana, who was pitched out of the saddle, as his horse went down, with a smashed shoulder.

He picked himself up and ran shouting after his men, though I doubt if these would have faced Payindah's lead. But Henga was after him, running like a deer. Atana saw him, and, seeing him gaining, drew his sword and turned, and a minute later they were at it.

The fight did not last two minutes. Seeing Kyrlos was not badly hurt, I, with several of the men, had followed Henga, and, as we got there, we saw Atana's sword slip from his grip as Henga's steel ploughed up his wrist under the mail. I thought Henga would give him the point in the throat then and there.

But instead he dropped his weapon, sprang on Atana, and hurled him on his face on the ground, kneeling above him, and with his knees pinning his arms to his side. Atana fought and writhed to get his arms free as Henga seized him with both hands under the chin, twisting the man's head up and back till he could look down into his face.

Then he said slowly and distinctly:

"You miscalled the Lady Aryenis just now, and said you would bring her to shame even as you and your brother did my cousin. For these things I promised to kill you with my two hands.

"When I send your brother to join you in hell, remember to tell him that I kept my word."

And with that he twisted Atana's head very slowly round and back, looking down into his face the while, the man's eyes starting from his head, and his legs threshing the ground till suddenly something seemed to give; he straightened out slowly, gave a spasmodic jerk and a long shiver, and lay still.

Henga waited an instant before he loosed his grip. Then he got slowly to his feet, and, picking up his sword, wiped it on the dead man's cape. He rolled over the body with his foot, the limp head grotesquely twisted back, and looked at it thoughtfully.

Spitting on the ground, he turned to me:

"The world is somewhat cleaner now. That is a useful trick, which I have practised long against the day when Atana or his brother and I should meet."

"It is," I said. "I envy you that piece of work, which I would have liked to do myself, but it seems that you have the greater right."

My blood boiled as I thought of those cruel leering eyes looking at Aryenis in the gate.

Payindah had come running up just at the end, and, as Henga got up and wiped his sword, he said to him in Punjabi:

"'Twas well thrown that, and you held the son of an evil father down cleverly ere you sent him to his own place. I would like to wrestle with you one day, for I also am a wrestler of note."

I translated this to Henga, and he smiled.

"Tell your man I thank him for his words, and will gladly wrestle with him later. There are ten silver pieces for the first soldier who throws me, but none have earned them yet, though all the stout lads try."

The Shamans had disappeared by now, and Henga's men came up, bearing the other two men whom Payindah had hit. One was stone dead, a bullet between the shoulders; the other still breathed, though he looked as if he had not long to go, for the bullet had caught him just over the groin, and his face was drawn and sweaty, and his lips were blue.

The men said something to Henga, who turned to me.

"They ask if they shall kill. He has broken the truce, and has no right to life. But he is your man's man."

"No," said I, "we do not kill wounded men without reason. This man is but a soldier who followed his leader. Let him live, though I think it will not be for long."

He turned and spoke to the soldiers, who looked surprised, but they said nothing, and, picking up the wounded man, carried him up to the fort.

Then we rejoined Kyrlos, who was sitting down, while one of his men tied up his neck.

"'Tis but a scratch," he said. "But such a thing has never been known before that blood should flow at an envoy's truce. It was clearly meant if I refused their terms, for, see you, they were in the saddle before Atana joined them. Well, they have failed, and now we shall have war, real war, till one or other of us goes down. That is a fine weapon you have, that kills a man at three times a fair bowshot with naught but a little noise. To us it savours of magic, but you and your friends are no magicians: you are far too simple in your ways."

And he smiled a little in his grave way.

Then he turned to Henga. "I am glad you had your chance of paying your debt to that hell-hound. When we ride to their country, you shall come with us and settle your account with his brother.

"And now," said he to me, "we will drink a bowl of wine and then ride on to Aornos to catch the rest after you have changed your clothes."

I went and changed into my own clothes, after which Henga's men brought us bowls of wine, and I noticed that,

before Henga drank, he poured a little on the ground as though he were performing some rite.

Then we mounted, and with our escort set our faces north for Aornos, crossing the Astara by a narrow bridge of boats.

It was a wide stream, nearly one hundred and fifty yards across, and deep by the look of it. In many places the bank was fringed by willow trees and covered with turf, while downstream from us fat cattle were grazing in the lush meadow grass. As Stephnos had said the day before, it was a fertile country.

I asked Kyrlos if there was any special significance in Henga's pouring out some of his wine, and he said that it was a custom, after battle, to thank the gods for good fortune.

"An old pagan custom, but you still see it among some of our people who follow the truth. 'Tis strange how old customs linger, especially such semi-religious ones. And, speaking of pagans, tell me, Harilek, in your land are there no followers of many gods?"

"Not in my own country, though there be in some of the countries we rule, for we rule many. In the land where I served as a soldier, and where the men I command came from, there are many such, followers of strange gods, each district worshipping their own, and others there be like the two soldiers with me, who believe in one God only, but not in Christ."

"Jews, perchance, of whom we read."

"No, not Jews, though like them in some ways, eating not pork, and preparing animals for food by cutting their throats, and following other Jewish customs. But these follow their own prophet Mohammed. Have you heard of him?"

"No. We read of false teachers, but of this one I have not heard. But I am not learned in the matter. You must speak with our priests when you have leisure. Perchance they may know of him."

"And those among you who are not Christians, what gods do they worship?" I asked.

"Many. Some harmless, some evil. But the most part follow gods of simple kind. Tolerant, and, save that they teach nothing but what is human, and in no way lift up man, harmless for good or evil. Their priests have sometimes given trouble, fearing lest the people desert them and their shrines be left without offerings, but in our clan they also are generally well disposed, content with such gifts as the people bring them, sober, well living, ignorant men.

"But among the Brown Sakae they are more evil, and it is said that they sometimes bring the people back even to the human sacrifices of old days of prisoners and such, and certainly they are magicians given to dark practices, even as the Shamans."

"And Henga? What is he?"

"Henga's folk are one of the few families of standing among the Blue Sakae who hold to the old gods. Many times I hoped his father, a most upright and worthy man, would change. He was a firm friend of mine, and when he lay dying I rode to see him. Even upon his deathbed he said to me that he knew the old gods could not be real, and he hoped soon to know the truth, but nowise could he see that my belief was any more right than his. His eldest son, who now holds his lands, follows his belief, a strong, faithful man, whom you will meet at Aornos. I hope some day both he and Henga will be persuaded to the truth."

"What is the story of Henga, and that matter of Atana and his brother? From what he said, 'twas clear Atana's brother or Atana had done some wrong to one of his folk. He is sad-looking, too."

"Yes. He has cause to be sad. It was a cousin of his named Thais, a beautiful girl and of sweet temper, but headstrong. We thought they would marry one day. I remember Thais stayed with us awhile the previous summer when Henga was with my guard. But he is slow of speech, and some women think him dull, seeing not his worth.

"Then, in an evil day, while visiting friends among the Green Sakae — there was peace in the land two years ago,

peace of a sort — she met Atana's brother Atros, who is an even worse fiend than was Atana.

"He feigned to love her, and with false promises induced her to fly with him, for she knew her father would never consent to marriage, hating the Shamans as we do.

"But marriage came not, and after a while he tired of her. Finally, wearying of her importunity — her time was drawing near — he said if she would she might return to her own folk, or else he would send her to the gate among the archers' women next day.

"Broken with shame, she came that night to one of my men then in the Shamans' city, and gave him a letter for Henga, whom she remembered in her trouble. My man, alas! knew not all her story, or he might have saved her then. And that night she killed herself.

"But, when Henga got her letter, he took oath, as she had asked him, that he would kill Atros and Atana, who had helped him. Among our people, even among the Christians, the blood feud still remains. But among those who believe in the old gods, more, perhaps, among Shamans and the Brown Sakae, it runs from father to son, and Henga swore he would act to them in their own fashion.

"He took leave and went up disguised into their country, and all but succeeded in slaying Atros. But the guards came up in time, and Henga only escaped with his life after he got that sword-gash on his forehead that maybe you noticed. Since then he has waited his time, and to-day, as you saw, part of his oath was fulfilled. But presently I hope the rest will also be lifted from him when we go up against the Shamans.

"'Tis true, doubtless, that God punishes those who spoil His handiwork, but it is well that men should sometimes do His justice, lest, from its slowness, others forget its certainty and take to evil ways."

I felt sorry for Henga. No wonder he looked so sad. I hoped that in the fullness of time he would meet Atros, and also, I hoped, I should be there to see it. Perhaps I have some

streak of savage madness in me, but, although I do not think I am cruel, and though I hate killing for killing's sake, there are certain times when I feel I could gladly sit by and see a man die slowly, when I hear of things like this, for instance, or when I saw Aryenis bound in the gate.

We had ridden over the broad valley and reached the hills beyond. Kyrlos pointed and said:

"There is Aornos — see, among the pines up there. 'Tis the second largest town in our Blue Sakae country. With your wonder-glass you will be able to see the houses."

I think of all our belongings, after our rifles, the things that most impressed the Sakae were our field-glasses and the telescope.

I checked my pony, and, looking through the glasses at the faint blur that Kyrlos indicated, saw the town, a long stone-walled mass of houses, with a high tower in the centre. It nestled among orchards and terraced fields with many scattered pine woods, on one side of a long hill with wooded top.

In three quarters of an hour more we were following a broad road that ran up to the city. There was a lot of traffic on it, big slow-moving bullock-carts piled with household gear, chattering troops of women with babies and little staring children, a few bodies of half-armed men, evidently levies assembling. Kyrlos said these were the people from the frontier villages, many of whom in time of war fled back to safer refuge behind the frontier forts.

A quarter of an hour later saw us riding in under the big gate, amid a clatter of arms, as the guard turned out and clashed their spears on the stone paving.

It was a fine gate with high stone towers on either side, in the crenellated tops of which one saw the glitter of steel as the sentries paced to and fro. On either side of the gate a long solid wall of grey granite, some forty feet high, slid away to girdle the city, with below it a dry ditch spiked and palisaded. Aornos would be a tough proposition to take without artillery. Above the big gate, with the drawbridge over which we rode, and the massive timber doors nearly a foot thick

covered with iron plates, were two great beams like cranes, which, to my joy, I later discovered to be a form of a catapult hurling blocks of stone and nets of smaller stones. We had got back to the Middle Ages, all right.

We rode up the main street at a footpace, the people saluting Kyrlos as he passed. The road was broad and clean, paved with irregular-shaped blocks of stone, and guttered on either side, while the buildings, if not exactly mansions, were for the most part of stone, well built, and cleanly kept.

They were mostly shops here, with an open storey below and balconies above. At night the lower part was closed by big wooden doors, with iron bars and large clumsy padlocks. But now all were open, and the shopkeepers sat there vending their goods and chaffering with the passers-by.

They seemed rather to group by trades. I noticed a series of cloth shops, then several dealers in earthenware, then a few metal shops with copper and brass bowls and iron cooking-utensils displayed. Then a corner devoted to sellers of leather gear, followed by several shops whose stock-in-trade seemed to be rope and hemp stuff of all types.

I suppose it facilitates marketing, or else the shop-keepers can keep prices more or less level by mutual arrangement. It was nice to see again most of the marketing being done by women with baskets, rather than by men, as is usually the case in the East:

Strapping country women, passing in groups from shop to shop, bareheaded in the sunlight, with their tight cloth bodices and short full skirts; town dwellers with finer clothes; here a lady in the simpler, straighter dress such as Aryenis wore, with a servant behind her; there a couple of soldiers in steel caps, bows slung behind them, chaffing good-naturedly a buxom matron with an unruly donkey.

And over all a vivid blue sky, and beyond, the great snow-peaks of Saghar Mor — blue shadowed white — that seemed to fill the northern sky.

We turned into a winding street that ran slightly uphill,

and at the end came to the entrance of the big tower I had seen. It was built in the centre of a high stone-walled enclosure, which formed the citadel of the town, and inside the walls were soldiers' barracks, some dwelling-houses, and the big stone house of Torka, Henga's brother, who was chief of the sub-clan of the Blue Sakae of these parts.

As we rode up to the gate, he came out to meet us, a tall, well-built man, not unlike Henga, but clean-shaven, an uncommon thing among the Sakae. He had a pleasant, very intellectual face, grave and keen. I learnt later that he was versed in the law, and after the custom of the Sakae administered law and justice through his district, subject always to the right of appeal to the chief of the clan.

As we entered the great hall, Aryenis ran down the stairs to greet us and ask anxiously what news her father brought, and whether all had gone well. She was very disturbed when she saw the bloodstained bandage round his neck, and it took a good deal to reassure her that it was indeed — as Kyrlos said — only a deep scratch. She insisted on Forsyth coming to see it at once, and bandaging it properly then and there.

After we had brushed off the traces of our journey a bit, we had a late breakfast, at which Kyrlos announced his intention of riding round the town in the afternoon and inspecting the troops and defences. Forsyth asked if he might accompany them, and Kyrlos said he would be very pleased if he did.

Stephnos and Wrexham had breakfasted before we came, and then ridden straight on to visit the fort at Takos, some ten miles north near the border. There had been some Shaman activity reported there, and Stephnos, in his capacity of A.D.C. to his father, had gone to get a report from the local commander. Wrexham, anxious to see all he could, had ridden with him, taking Firoz along, too.

I was pleased to get a chance of being alone with Aryenis for the first time in the last three days. I asked her what she was going to do, and whether she was tired after the morn-

ing's ride, at which she laughed, saying it was but a matter of fifteen miles, and she had often ridden twenty-five and thirty with her father when he was visiting the districts. The Blue Sakae chiefs are great believers in the personal touch and are always going round the country, a fact which I think goes far to enhance their popularity, and ensures that the minor officials keep up to their work, and that all and sundry have frequent opportunities of voicing personally to their chiefs any grievances they may have.

"Would you like to ride with me this afternoon, Harilek? I go to see an old man who is a friend of my father's and very good to me always. He is rather an invalid, being partly paralyzed from a wound, and so cannot come and see us. His house is about four miles out."

"I should like to very much, Aryenis. Does he also talk the old Greek?"

"Yes. Most of the educated people do, so you will not have to sit dumb, or use me as an interpreter, which is always unpleasant. I will order the horses, and if you meet me here in half an hour we will ride out. You will be able to see the rest of the city on the way."

I went over to the quarters that had been allotted to us, and put a new bandage on my face. It was healing up fast now; luckily the arrows were evidently clean, but, as Forsyth had said, it was going to leave a useful mark.

I found Payindah there cleaning up the rifles, and he asked me for some money. I inquired what he wanted it for, so he said he was going out into the city with Temra, the old N.C.O. — a sort of sergeant-major — of Kyrlos's guard, who had ridden with us in the morning.

As I gave him the money, I asked if he thought they would take it, whereat he laughed, saying he had never yet found a place where good silver would not pass, and, anyway, Temra would be with him.

"How do you talk with Temra, seeing neither of you know the other's language?" I asked.

"How did I talk with the people in France?" he replied.

"Besides, I know some words of Temra's language. Some of it is like bad Pashtu, and I talk Pashtu a little."

I noted that for Forsyth's information. The mystery of these people was growing. First the upper classes talking Greek, then there being many Christians among them, and now Payindah informing me that some of the words were like bad Pashtu. Evidently we had struck a real ethnological puzzle.

I put on my least frayed khaki coat, and beautified myself with my old regimental tie, which Aryenis had returned. It did not look too bad with a very faded shirt that had once been khaki, but was now a sort of apricot.

"Where do you go?" asked Payindah, as he polished up my *chaplis*.

"Riding with the princess to see a friend of hers." Payindah and Firoz had christened Aryenis the "Shahzadi" (the princess) from the day we met her father, and discovered that she was a person of some note in the country.

"It is time you wedded a wife," said Payindah, handing me my *chaplis*. "Otherwise there will be no Lake sahibs in the regiment later on when my nephew becomes a subadar. Such a one as the Shahzadi, whose eyes are steady when they look on death, and who climbs like a markhor, and is, moreover, good-looking in the manner of the sahibs, would be a fitting mother of sons."

"Don't be a blithering ass, Payindah!" said I, putting on the *chaplis*. "Go away with Temra and swagger in the bazaar."

I could see that he had taken some pains to make himself as smart as he could. Doubtless it was pleasant to him to observe the women frankly admiring him, and telling of his part in saving Aryenis.

"Why do the sahibs always get angry when one speaks to them on marriage, pretending they have never thought of any such things? Now, among *my* people of the Punjab —"

But I was out of the door by then, and did not hear the rest. Typical talk of an old sepoy, who considered it his business

to tell his sahib what he ought or ought not to do. All the same, I reflected, Aryenis's eyes were very steady when they looked on death. Moreover, they were exceedingly beautiful — in fact, quite in keeping with the rest of her. And with that reflection I entered the great hall.

CHAPTER XVI

ARYENIS AND I VISIT PAULOS

As I entered, Aryenis appeared on the staircase the other side of the hall in her riding-dress, and I realized once more the truth of Payindah's words. She was extremely good-looking, if such a word can be applied fairly to some one who is very beautiful. Yes; she would be just the sort of wife of whom a man would feel really proud.

She looked at me critically and then smiled.

"I thought that only women were supposed to be vain. Why, O Harilek, have you got that coloured thing round your throat? Is this a custom of your folk when they go out riding with ladies to see old men? You have also got on another coat, not so shabby as the one you usually have. I think" — she looked again — "it is the one I used to wear."

It was, as a matter of fact.

"All the same," she went on, "when we get to Miletis you must have new things. I think that I will see to it, since men are not to be trusted to choose their clothes."

"Thank you, Aryenis," said I. "You told us we were not able to feed ourselves. Are we trusted to do anything?"

"Very little," said Aryenis, looking down on me from the height of the second stair. "No men are really to be trusted without a woman to look after them. Men and babies, they are all the same, except when it comes to battle, and even then men really want a woman to encourage them and pet them afterwards. Even when men are playing they generally have to ask a woman to look at them just like children run and call their mothers to come and see their games. Come here and let me put that bandage straight for you."

"What will Forsyth say if you change it?"

"Forsyth did not tie that one, Harilek. Either you or Payindah did it, and did it very badly." She was adjusting

it as she spoke, and she carefully pushed it to one side to see if the wound was all right; at least, that's what it felt like.

"You are branded for the rest of your life, I think, Harilek, so that you may never forget the gate. There, that looks better."

"I don't want to forget it, Aryenis. I can remember the gate very well without a scar to help me."

She hurriedly changed the subject.

"Come; the horses wait."

She swung herself into the saddle of her mare before I could help her. Then, with two mounted archers behind us, we rode out of the gate down into the city, and, when we got to the main street we turned up it in the opposite direction from the one at which we had come in in the morning. We passed through the same crowd of people as we had seen before, and now, when they saw Aryenis, many of them called to her, and I could see all heads turning our way. Aryenis is a wonder at making every one know her, but then you couldn't help noticing her in the thickest of crowds.

She smiled at those who spoke to her, and passed a word or two with some of the shopkeepers who came running out to greet her. We rode through the northern gate, a replica of the one we had entered in the morning, out on to a broad highway with gardens on either side.

After going a couple of miles, we struck off to the left, and, riding up the hillside, followed a narrow track, along which flowed a little irrigation channel shaded with willows, almond, and silver-barked poplar. Most of the trees were now shedding their leaves, but in summer it must have been a very pretty, shady, green lane.

The ground on either side was cut up into fields, which evidently drew their water from the irrigation channel, for there were water-cuts and banks, and at one place a man was opening a little rough sluice to let the water on to the fields at the side.

About us were wooded slopes, and all along the hillsides

little terraced fields, fruit orchards with grey stone walls, scattered little stone houses, and ricks of straw and hay.

"You have a fertile country, Aryenis, and a beautiful one. Look at those hills there!"

Beyond us long slopes of blue hills, climbing ever higher and higher toward the main snow-peak, and between them dim blue shadows, not unlike my own Sussex country that Kipling sings of:

"Belt upon belt, the wooded dim
Blue goodness of the weald."

"Is it not, Harilek? I know no other country save that of the Green Sakae, but I love this more than all I have seen. Is your country like this?"

"My own is just like that part there under the hills. I might almost be looking at the landscape round my father's house at home."

"You said your father was dead, or so my father told me. Who, then, holds his land? Have you an elder brother?"

"No. I had only one brother, and he was killed during the war I spoke of. My sister, whose husband was also killed in the same war, lives there now while I am away."

"And you will go back some day, I suppose, and settle?"

"Perhaps. When I grow too old to wander. But I shall not hurry back yet. I want to learn about your country first, and that will take a long time, I think."

"But does not your sister want you to come back and settle down and — look after the land?"

"She has not said so, much. She has her two sons, one of whom is fifteen now, and presently he will be old enough to manage things if I am away. Not that she wants any help really" — and I smiled as I thought of Ethel's masterful nature requiring any one to help her. "She has spent most of her life looking after my father, myself, my brother, and every one and everything else she has ever met," I explained. "I do not think she wants much help. Like you, she thinks all men are babies."

"So they are," said Aryenis defiantly. "Men never grow up, except when they go bad. Nice men never grow up, not properly, although they pretend to, and put on airs and speak gravely; feign to talk important secrets when we women aren't there, and turn us out of council meetings; try to look impressive, and puff and blow if you ask them anything. But it's all make-believe. In the things that really matter a man of fifty is no wiser than a boy of fifteen."

"What things?" said I, honestly seeking for knowledge.

"Oh, lots of things, real ones; not playthings like bows or new ways of feathering arrows, or new kinds of bits for horses, with which men fill their heads and for which they invent weird new names that no one understands to make them sound important. But when it comes to the real things of life, they're babies, just babies."

She flicked her mare with her switch as if she were endeavouring to drive knowledge into the heads of those undeveloped infantile beings, the nice members of the male sex.

"But you haven't made it clear what are the really important things," I persisted.

"I couldn't make it clear, because, if I did you wouldn't understand them, being a man."

"And hence a babe, I suppose?"

"Certainly, a babe. Oh, undoubtedly a babe." Then, completely off the point, "Do you know, Harilek, you haven't asked after my shoulder for two days?"

"I'm so sorry; how is it?"

As a matter of fact I had asked Forsyth twice daily on the point, and knew that it was practically healed up.

"It's getting better, and the doctor thinks it won't leave a mark."

"That's good. Now a babe would probably prefer to have a mark."

"Yes, exactly; so that he could show it to people and talk about it."

"And a woman, being grown up, would be much better pleased not to have a mark that might spoil the look of her

shoulder. I begin to understand the important things of life, Aryenis, 'the things that really matter.'"

"I think you're trying to be rude. But my shoulder does matter."

"That's just what I said. I think any one's shoulder would matter, and certainly yours."

"And why mine, certainly?"

"Because it's the nicest one I've ever seen."

Whereupon she blushed and hastily proceeded to point out her friend's house, which was just coming into sight round the bend in front. Then she put her mare into a canter, and we came up to the gate in a cloud of dust.

It was a long, low, stone house of two storeys, with little windows above like attics. The garden was very charming with its patterned flower-beds, its big chenar trees copper and gold in their October leaf, and the flagged stone walks in the grass. Evidently the owner was a man of taste.

As we rode in, servants ran out, and, when they saw who it was, they clustered round excitedly and kissed Aryenis's hand. They had only heard of her escape the evening before.

We dismounted and passed through the house into a walled garden behind, scented with late roses and gay with autumn flowers, where we found an old man, clean-shaven and fragile-looking, lying on a couch with rugs over his legs. Aryenis ran up to him and kissed him on both cheeks. It was evident that they were very fond of each other. She talked to him a minute, and then she turned round and presented me.

"So this is the young man that brought you back, is it, Aryenis?" said he in Greek, holding out both his hands to me.

Then he looked me up and down, and it seemed that I passed muster.

"Stephnos rode this way not so long ago, bringing with him another stranger. They were hurrying, but he stopped a minute to tell me the news. God is very good to send you back safe to your friends, child."

Then he turned to me.

"Stephnos tells me that you come from a far country, but that you speak the old tongue? It makes it even clearer than before to an old man that there is no chance in the world. All is intended."

Then, looking at my face, he went on:

"I see you have been wounded, or so I presume. Was that got while you rescued Aryenis?"

"It was, sir. But 'tis only a scratch. But Aryenis says it will leave a mark, whereas the one she got on her shoulder will not leave any, which is important."

Aryenis interrupted:

"He is teasing me because I told him men were babes, uncle mine" (Aryenis called him uncle, although he was actually only a very distant cousin of her father's), "and when they got scars liked people to see them, whereas women —"

"Whereas women — especially pretty ones — would be greatly concerned if they got any scars that might show at all. I understand, Aryenis." He smiled at her.

Servants brought us carved chairs, but Aryenis insisted on sitting on the couch by the old man.

"Be seated, sir," he said. "I would hear how you saved Aryenis, only I would hear it from her lips since I shall thus get somewhat more of the truth. I understand that you have been a soldier, and soldiers are notoriously bad at telling the real facts about themselves in such matters."

So she gave him a flowery version of her rescue, with italics in most places concerning the part I had played, and minor italics for Payindah now and then. After that she gave him a very accurate description of our camels and our camp. Very little misses Aryenis.

"'Twas well done, Harilek," he said at last. "I do not know whether Aryenis is the more fortunate in being rescued by you, or you the more fortunate in being able to rescue her. When I was a young man I dreamed of such things as that, but they did not come my way."

"I have no doubt whatever, sir. The good fortune was entirely on my side."

"And Aryenis says that you slew the Shamans with new weapons, such as have not been heard of in our country. Have you them with you? I was a lover of weapons ere misfortune tied me to this couch."

I pulled out my pistol, unloaded it, and placed it in the old man's hand, explaining roughly the way it worked as I showed him the cartridges.

"Wonderful," he said. "That little thing which you say is as the miniature of our fort catapults will send those tiny bolts right through a mail-coat and through the man inside. And your man who slew the others, was he armed with this?"

"No. We have bigger ones that slay much farther; indeed, if you have eyes that are keen enough to point them straight, they will slay at over a mile. This is the dagger of which the other is the long spear."

"Wonderful! Wonderful! Man has yet much to discover." He handed me back the pistol, watching me reload it, and put it back in its holster.

"Stay you long in our country? If so you must come and see me again. Aryenis knows the way well enough. She has played here since she was a child."

"I know not. But we stay for the war, and until that finishes in your favour we shall not leave."

"Then I think you will stay some while. This will be a long and cruel war. Why do you stay for a war which is not your affair?"

"We stay because it is the matter of Aryenis and of her people, and since she was our guest we consider it in some sort as our business, too. Besides, we like not such of the ways of the Shamans as we have seen." I told him of the morning's episode, and Kyrlos's narrow escape.

"The Shamans grow bold to practise open treachery like that. They must hold the other clans in thrall like dogs. Ten years ago, had such a thing been done, the whole of the clans would have turned on them." He stopped; then continued:

"You speak as I would have spoken when I was your age and a whole man. But not all men would consider that the

war was their affair because they had saved Aryenis. Rather would they incline to say they had done their part and somewhat over. I think that all the fortune was not with you; some large portion goes to Aryenis."

"So also think I," said she. "Life is sweet, but when with the gift of life one gets the gift of friends as well, then is one doubly blest."

"True, child. You seem to have had both given to you in the gate" — and he was silent a space.

Then he clapped his hands, and a servant brought us out wine and sweet cakes on little silver trays. We talked awhile, and he asked many questions about the countries we came from. He was well read, and told me that he had some old manuscripts which he would show me one day. He knew the classics, Arrian and Herodotus amongst them, and could follow a little about India when I tried to explain our journey to him.

Then Aryenis went into the house to see the old servants, and he and I were left alone. He looked after her as she walked across the lawn.

"Aryenis is just like her mother — I sometimes think she is her mother when she comes here."

"Her mother is dead, is she not?" I asked.

"Yes, many years ago. And yet it seems but yesterday that she sat here as Aryenis does now. She and Kyrlos often came to see me." He sighed a little.

"And to-morrow you ride to Miletis. When things are settled you will come and see me again, will you not? 'Tis nice to see one who has seen places that I have read of, but none I know have ever seen."

"Surely," said I.

"You are Christians also, Aryenis tells me. She wrote me a letter which came by a fast messenger yesterday. Your faith was a matter of some surprise, since we believed that most of those who lived beyond the desert were pagans."

"We are. All the countries around us, even the old Greece, are Christian now."

"Yes. That, of course, I knew. But we had no idea you came from so far, thinking rather you came from the nearer lands which were overrun by the slant-eyed folk, who — so our old books tell us — drove our people out across the desert."

"I should like to see those old books when we have time. We wondered whence came your folk. Are you Greeks?"

"No, or so the books tell us. But there were some Greeks who came among us, bringing with them much knowledge of the arts, and, above all, of the true faith. It is a long story that I shall be pleased to tell you one day. But Aryenis comes, and you must ride. One should not be abroad after dark in time of war. We are not over-distant from the frontier even here, though it is many years since raiders came as far as Aornos."

Aryenis joined us and said that we must go. The horses waited saddled.

"Good-bye, uncle mine. All will be ready, will it not?"

"It will, child. I see that you were right — as ever — in what you wrote."

Then he said good-bye, and we went out to the horses.

Riding back I asked Aryenis to tell me Paulos's history.

"He was a great friend of my father's, and they both loved my mother. But she preferred father, and not long after they were married there was a raid on the border. My father went out with his men, and Paulos, who was then commanding one of the forts, went, too, with some of his.

"There was a fight, and father was beaten down and like to lose his life, being surrounded by the enemy. Paulos, seeing his danger, leapt in, holding off the enemy until more of his men came up; but while doing so he received a spear thrust in the back.

"At the time it was hoped it would be nothing but a simple wound, but in some way it damaged his legs, which gradually withered so that he lost nearly all power in them. Since then he has been a cripple tied to his couch.

"He must have suffered much, for father says he was a fine

rider and one keen on all kinds of sport, an active man, and a brave soldier.

"He never married, and lives alone there on his lands with his books, for he is a studious man, or became so when he could no longer take an active part in life.

"Father goes often to see him, for they were always like brothers, and mother held him in great affection. He treats me as his daughter, having no children of his own, and every year I go and spend some weeks with him. He is a lovable person to live with, and I have never heard him complain of his troubles, though it must be hard to lie there year after year unable to move without the help of a servant."

"It must be a hard life for one who has been active in his day. But he is fortunate in loving his books."

"Yes; but he loves life, too, and is always interested in all who come to see him and in their affairs, so that he keeps in life as it were through others. He often says to me that as he cannot live himself he tastes life through other people's senses. You like him, do you not?"

"Indeed, I think one could not help liking him. It is wonderful how he keeps his interest in things where other men would become just querulous invalids."

The dusk was coming on as we reached the city gates and rode up the winding street into the citadel. The shops were all alight with little twinkling oil-lamps, where late passers-by were making their last purchases.

When we got in, we found Kyrlos and Torka sitting alone in the great hall. The others were evidently not back. Kyrlos asked after Paulos, and said he hoped to find time to see him on the way to Miletis the next day.

Forsyth came in presently, and we waited for a while, sitting over the fire, for the evenings were very chilly. But they did not come, so finally we started our evening meal. In the middle of it a messenger arrived from Stephnos, saying that there were reports of an enemy raid expected, and that they were stopping to see if anything occurred during the night, and would join us next day at Miletis.

Torka's wife was away, and Kyrlos had asked him not to have any one in to supper, as he wished for a quiet evening, since there would be much to do for the next few days. Also he would be glad to get to bed early and rest his neck, which was getting stiff. Forsyth sent him off shortly after we had had supper, and went with him to bandage up his wound again. Torka went to see about the arrangements for the next day, and Aryenis and I were left alone sitting over the fire in the hall.

We were neither of us very talkative. She was leaning forward, one shapely arm propping her chin, gazing into the glowing logs, and I was, I think, gazing at her, with the firelight glinting on her wonderful hair. Payindah's words kept on coming back to me, and I could not help thinking what a very alluring prospect a vista of evenings with some one like Aryenis sitting by the fire would be, especially if the some one were one's own Aryenis, and the firelight came from one's own fireside.

"You are silent, Harilek," she said at last, turning her head.

"So also are you, Aryenis. What were you looking at in the fire? Pictures like the children look for in the winter evenings?"

"Perhaps. It is pleasant to sit by the fire, seeing pictures of things that might be: fairy stories such as we used to be told, of enchanted castles and dragons, and things like that."

"You forget the fairy princess with the red-gold locks, Aryenis. There is always one of them in the stories, isn't there?"

"Do all fairy princesses have red-gold locks?"

"I don't know about all, but some of them do. The one in my story did."

"What story is that?"

"Oh, only one I was making up while you were looking into the fire. Wonderful red-gold locks, and hazel-grey eyes, steady, clear ones, and — no marks on her shoulders."

"That's mean, Harilek. I shan't tell you my story now if you're going to laugh at me."

"I wasn't laughing at you. I'm glad there isn't going to be a mark."

"But there will be really, only it'll be so small that none will see it unless they know where to look for it."

"That makes the story all the better. Princess with small mark on shoulder, that only the fairy prince who knows about it is able to find. Then, when he goes to look for the princess when she gets lost — they always get lost — he has to keep an eye on shoulders all the time. I'm afraid all the princesses in that story would have to wear very low-necked clothes or he'd never get to the end of his search."

"And how does the princess know the prince? Does he have fairy marks?"

"Oh, he'd have wiggly ones where the dragon's claws scratched him. Purple scratches, probably, and a tooth-mark or two down one arm."

"I don't believe that's right. Fairy princes don't get bitten by dragons. They always kill them first with wonderful shiny swords the colour of that blue flame there."

"Well, this would have to be a special kind of prince with wiggly purple marks."

"No. I think he would have just the same kind of mark as the princess, a small one big enough to see, but not too ugly — on his face, perhaps."

"Then I might be able to be a fairy prince, mightn't I, since Forsyth says I shall have a mark across my face that every one will be able to see, all right?"

"You might — if you found a fairy princess of the right kind and didn't grow up too much."

She looked back into the fire and was silent again, the dancing firelight playing across the long curve of her neck and chasing little shadows over the rose of her cheeks, faintly flushed in the glow.

"Do you know what Payindah and Firoz call you now, Aryenis?" I asked after a while.

"No? What is it?"

"‘Shahzadi,’ which in their language means ‘Princess.’ I think they must be observant folk."

"That is rather nice of them. I like that title. I feel like one sometimes when there are dragons about, and a fairy prince would be useful."

"Ever seen the fairy prince come along?"

She looked back into the fire and pondered quite a long time. Then she said slowly:

"I think I did once, though I'm not quite sure. Only he hadn't got any purple marks, not even quite a little one, on his face."

"And there were dragons?"

Aryenis shivered. "Lots!"

"And did the prince kill them, all right?"

"Yes, quite dead."

"And then he and the princess would live happily ever after? That's the proper ending, isn't it?"

"It's the proper ending — in a fairy story."

She got up slowly.

"To-morrow you're going to take me to see Uncle Paulos again on the way to Miletis. Father is coming later; he's got things to do here, so he says that we are to ride on ahead, and I want to go to Uncle Paulos. It's only a little way off the road."

"I should like to go there again very much. I like your Uncle Paulos. He might have been a fairy prince easily."

"No," said Aryenis; "he plays another part."

"What's that?" said I.

"Fairy godfather generally. Now I'm going to see if father's properly tied up. Don't forget that we start early. Good-night, Harilek."

"Good-night — Shahzadi."

As I went to my room I wondered who Aryenis's fairy prince, or the one who might be a fairy prince, was. I felt I should hate the sight of him pretty usefully when I did run into him. And the blighter had no marks, "not even a little

one," while I was marked with a very usefully puckered cheek.

I found Forsyth in bed, smoking the last of his cigarettes.

"No more tobacco after to-night. D——!" said he. "I wonder if there's likely to be any wild tobacco growing in this country?"

"May be, but I doubt it. We've got a little tea left, I think, if you'd like that."

"No, we haven't. I gave the lot to Aryenis, who's taken rather a fancy to the new drug. I think she's saving it up for Christmas or something. Besides tea's filth, though I have smoked it in a pipe upon occasions."

While I was undressing, I told him what Paulos had said about his people having been driven across the desert by the slant-eyed folk in the dim ages.

"Ye gods!" said Forsyth, sitting up. "The green-eyed Wusuns, of course! What a mug I was not to think of that at first."

"Who the blazes are the green-eyed Wusuns?" said I, getting into bed.

"Real, original, white-skinned Nordic folk, same family as the Danes and Norsemen, and all the crowd that made up the true white races of Europe in the early centuries. They were here in the first century B.C., when the Chinese were scrapping with them. You read about it in the old Chinese books. Only they disappeared, and most people think they either got pushed westward or wiped out. This lot evidently got washed up here somehow or other, and have been cut off by the desert ever since.

"'Wusun' was their Tartar name, and it means 'the tall ones'; and, barring that they were tall and white and had 'green' eyes, which, of course, includes grey and blue and all the shades in between, we know nothing of them. But here they are, white, Aryan speech, fair hair, grey, green, and blue eyes, and tall, as we've noticed. What a find!"

"And that explains Aryenis and the various village women we've seen. I thought they didn't look like the kind of Greeks I've met."

"My dear man, the Wusuns are your first cousins, same as the Saxons, and the Danes, and the Normans, who were practically pure Nordic. The present Greek date from a long time before that."

I had some difficulty in getting to sleep with Forsyth raving about his lost Nordics and Wusuns. It was all very interesting, but I was far more interested in wondering who Aryenis's fairy prince was, and hoping he would fall over the cliff or get eaten by dragons or something. No, I didn't really, since Aryenis might want him. I almost came round to a more charitable frame of mind, and hoped he would be a proper kind of fairy prince and not a make-believe. But I fell asleep, feeling very sore about the blighter. Then I got chased by a dragon that got mixed up with a fairy prince, and Aryenis came in in the middle and said he wasn't a real one, and where were the wiggly marks? Then I fell down a precipice myself, and was unconscious: came to in the middle of an earthquake, and opened my eyes to find Payindah shaking me because it was time to get up.

CHAPTER XVII

ARYENIS'S HOME-COMING

WHEN I got into the dining-hall I found every one at breakfast. Aryenis said good-morning very nicely and politely, but made no reference to dragons and fairy princes.

Kyrlos asked Forsyth to keep him company during the day. He was going to see some of the chief men of the district, and would ride on to Miletis in the afternoon, probably arriving latish. Aryenis and I were to go with the baggage by the main road.

After expounding all this Kyrlos and Forsyth, with Torka in attendance, went off, and Aryenis and I went out to find our horses waiting. The baggage animals had already started, and we passed them near the north gate, Payindah, very debonair on a pony, riding with Temra at the head.

It was colder that morning. There was a fresh breeze blowing, and little wisps of cloud that cleared later in the day. But the cold suited Aryenis, as it does all really fair people, and the wind whipped the colour to her cheeks, and made her eyes sparkle over the big collar of her fur-lined riding-coat.

We rode leisurely along the road and took the turning to Uncle Paulos's, our escort clattering behind.

"You haven't told me what we've come for," I said. "You didn't say anything about it yesterday when we left. Is it a surprise visit to your fairy godfather?"

"No. It's a surprise we — he's got for you."

"For me! Why, he only saw me for the first time yesterday."

"But that doesn't matter to fairy godfathers, does it, how many times they've seen people?"

She went on:

"I do hope you'll like what he's got for you. It's something just to tell you that he's glad you've brought me back. You see, he's very fond of me really."

"Then I'm sure I'll like it."

We rode in among the trees up to the house and went into the hall, where a fire was burning, and found Paulos sitting on his couch. It was too cold as yet for the lawn. The hall was a big place with one or two bits of really good statuary, showing distinct tracing of Greek craft; some trophies of arms on the panelled wall, and some skins of beasts on the dark wooden floor. There were bears still in the upper valleys in Sakaeland, and a certain number of spotted deer on the lower hills.

"Looking more than ever like the morning, Aryenis," said he as she kissed him. "The winter always suits you best. You've just the skin and hair for furs, child. Now take your cloak off and sit down by the fire while I tell Harilek what you've got for him."

"What *you've* got, uncle mine," said Aryenis hurriedly.

"I grow old and careless in my speech. I mean what I've got."

He turned to me.

"Harilek, do you wear mail in your country?"

"Not now. Our people used to, but when the noise weapons, as you call them, came in, folk gave up mail, because it was weight for no purpose, since the balls I showed you yesterday pierce it. But in this last war we took to wearing helmets of steel once again, and found some profit in them, since sometimes the balls glanced off."

I wasn't capable of explaining in archaic Greek the difference between high-velocity rifle-bullets and low-velocity shrapnel, and even if I had been it would have taken a long time to explain that to a man who'd never seen either gun or rifle.

"Well, now you go to a war where the enemy have no such weapons, only arrows, swords, and the like. Therefore mail will be of use to you."

"I was only thinking that yesterday when Kyrlos made me put on a mail jerkin," said I.

"You and I are about the same size, Harilek, or rather, you are the size I was before I became a cripple, and I have my old mail still by me. It is well kept, and, moreover, it is specially good, for, as I told you yesterday, I was once a lover of weapons and studied them deeply. We Sakae take great pride in our arms, handing them down from father to son.

"But I have no son, and I have long pondered to whom I should leave my war-gear when I die, for I have no relatives left save only Aryenis's father. I hoped that some day she might bring a son here to whom it might pass. But I should be over-old by then, and I would like to see some good soldier wear it before I die.

"Now, but for you, Aryenis would not be here to-day, and I should be still lonelier. So I would like you very much, if you will humour an old man, to take my mail and weapons and give me the pleasure of seeing a brave man wear them once more, more especially one to whom I owe a great deal, and Aryenis, who is to me as a daughter, owes more. She also wishes it, so that when you go into battle you may have some memento of her gratitude. 'Twill be a gift from us both, since all I have is hers."

I thought it was nice of the old man to put it as he did, and from what I knew of and about him it seemed to me a good mantle to assume.

"I thank you very much, Paulos. I shall be more than pleased to wear your mail and use your weapons. Aryenis told me something about you yesterday, and nothing would please me better than such a gift from you both."

"I hoped you would accept. And making the wish father to the thought, Aryenis got you garments yesterday in Aornos that they might be ready for you here to-day. Thus I shall have the pleasure of seeing you in my harness before you ride on. She will show you the way."

Aryenis led me to a room off the main hall, where a servant was waiting.

"You will find the clothes in there, and when you have changed, come back here and we will show you the mail."

"So you did choose my clothes, after all, Aryenis, being grown up! Thank you," said I as I entered the room.

The servant, a hatchet-faced old archer who had followed Paulos, helped me put on the new clothes that were laid out, and very comfortable I found them. The under-garments were of softest linen, and over those were a wadded vest and fleece-lined leather jerkin, with long loose trousers gartered from ankle to knee with plaited leather straps.

When I had put them on, with the new sandals, not unlike *chaplis*, but more elaborate, I went back to the hall, where I found Aryenis and Paulos looking over a set of mail and weapons which had not been there when I left.

Aryenis examined me with a critical eye. "They fit nicely, Harilek; do they not?"

I admitted they did.

"That is the advantage of having a woman to choose them for you, you see. Had you got them yourself, you would not have looked so well."

Paulos examined the clothes carefully.

"You have a good eye, child. They fit well. But that sleeve is not right; the under-sleeve is tucked up, I think."

Aryenis looked at it. "Yes. I will put it right. Hold out your hand, Harilek."

I held out my arm, and undoing the wrist she pushed back the leather to pull the fleece under-sleeve into place. Then she stood staring at my arm.

"Harilek! You were making up things last night. You've got all the wiggly purple marks."

I looked at my arm. Sure enough, I'd forgotten those scars right across my forearm from two bullet wounds that had gone septic.

"True, Shahzadi; but remember you said that the fairy prince — the one you mentioned at the end — who killed all the dragons had no marks, 'not even a little one on his face.' I've got several of them, including a long red one on my

cheek under this bandage. So we shall have to make another story to fit in with these marks."

She did up my sleeve without a word.

Paulos looked at us inquiringly. "What's the story of the wiggly marks?"

"We were telling fairy stories by the fire last night about dragons and things. And I said that dragons' claws made wiggly purple marks, and I forgot that I had some on my arm, only not from dragons — wounds from war — and Aryenis saw them just now. So I suppose she thought I had really been fighting dragons, and was surprised."

I thought that was neatly out of it, and hoped Aryenis did, too.

Paulos held up a mail shirt, a lovely thing, long sleeves ending in mittens with slit wrists, so that you could have your hands bare if you wanted to, woven in alternate rows of black and silvered steel that shimmered in the light.

"We have an old custom in this country, Harilek, that, when a man first puts on his mail and girds on his weapons for war, it is done for him by a woman of his house. But you are a stranger in a far land, and have no womenkind here. Therefore Aryenis will do proxy for them if you are willing. If you wear my mail I should like to see you don it in our old formal fashion."

I could but agree, so Aryenis passed the mail shirt over my head, and helped me adjust it in place. It came about halfway to my knees, and was very light. I had expected something heavier.

Then Paulos gave her a belt of linked silver plates chased and enamelled with little patterns, the centre one a cross, which she girded round my waist.

Then he handed her the short sword-sheath to fasten on, and last the sword, which she gave me hilt first. It was a most beautiful bit of armourer's work, with the queer filigree inlays in the steel: a two-foot double-edged blade ribbed down both sides with treble grooves to within two inches of the point, and a hilt of chiselled silver with little turquoise studs let in irregularly.

I sheathed it, and then she handed me my pistol-holster, which I strapped on to the under-leather of the belt.

It was a very grave-eyed Aryenis that helped me on with all this paraphernalia of war, quite a different person from the dancing-eyed girl who had chaffed me the day before about not being grown up, different again from the dreamy one who had sat looking into the fire talking of dragons and fairy princesses. But then that is the charm of Aryenis, that she is ever different and yet always the same.

"They fit you well and they suit you, Harilek," said Paulos. "It does me good to see them out again. I feel the younger for it. We old folk live our lives again in you young people. Now for the helmet and then you are complete, for I will not give you the long bow, which, I understand, you cannot use, nor indeed do you need it, having your own weapons."

Aryenis took up the steel cap, with its pointed centre and the low sweeping brim that covered all the back of the head round to the temples on either side. It was of bright polished steel, with a thin filigree pattern of silver beaten in all round above the rim. In front was an embossed silver plate fixed to the steel with two little sockets in it and a ring. Reaching up with both hands, she put it on my head, pulled up the chin-strap, and stepped back to see the effect.

"They fit as though made for him, uncle; don't they?"

"They do. I thought that we were of a size. Now, Harilek, you will be able to go out to this war of our people armed after their own fashion. You take with you, along with an old man's armour, an old man's prayers for your safety and his wishes for your good fortune. And also I know" — he turned to Aryenis — "the prayers and wishes of the lady who armed you."

"And the most heartfelt gratitude as well, Harilek. God keep you safe even as you saved me."

I thanked them as best I could, rather stammeringly, I think.

"Now we will drink to the good fortune of my old arms on Harilek," said Paulos, clapping his hands. Whereupon the

old hatchet-faced man brought us in wine of Paulos's best, and they drank to me. The old archer also drank and said a few words, which Aryenis translated as meaning to say that I looked a proper kind of soldier, and that he hoped I would carry the arms as worthily as his master had done. I think there was an old family-retainer spice of doubt in his mind on the point.

"And now we must ride," said Aryenis, putting on her cloak. "I want to get to Miletis early to-day and see every one. It's too wonderful to be getting home after thinking I had seen the last of it all. Good-bye, uncle mine, and thank you for everything."

"Good-bye, child," he said, kissing her. "Come and see me when the men ride away, and when this young man comes back, bring him, too, that I may hear how he has carried my arms. Good-bye, Harilek, and all good fortune mark your days. Remember that the Brown Sakae strike low, ever, upward from the knee."

He gave me his hand, and then Aryenis and I went out to the horses, the statuesque old man, with his grim scarred retainer standing behind him, watching us as we went.

Our escort apparently knew what to expect, for they evinced no surprise at my new rig-out, and one of them carried a package behind his saddle, which I guessed was my old clothes. But as I came down the steps they all touched their steel caps in salute to my new arms and to me wearing them, as is the custom of the Sakae when men don mail for the first time, and spoke to me, wishing me, as Aryenis translated, good fortune and high honour in war.

Considering we were complete strangers not knowing their tongue, and come in from Heaven alone knows where, I must say the Sakae were extraordinarily friendly. Never did we meet with a trace of enmity or jealousy among all Kyrlos's people. This I attribute to Aryenis's impossibly exaggerated account of our doings in the gate, for the Sakae consider personal valour as the greatest of passports to position. Money they count not at all, and birth but little; while they have

but small respect even for an hereditary chief until he has proven himself a man. But once a man has shown that his courage is beyond reproach, then they will follow him through thick and thin, and — if he be just and impartial — abide by his rule in peace if he be set over them, although they prefer to be ruled by those of good birth, considering such as more likely to deal impartial justice.

They drank to me from goblets of wine sent out by Paulos, and Aryenis made them a little speech on my behalf, which they seemed to approve. Then we mounted our horses, rode out of the grounds, and set our faces toward Miletis.

Riding down the lane, Aryenis pointed out to me the long stretch of Paulos's land, which ran all along the hill for several miles, and down below into the broad valley.

"Some day, when we've more time, I'll show you over it. There are some lovely bits up there among the woods."

From the road on this day of cloud-flecked blue sky, with the autumn sunshine and the fresh cool breeze in our faces, it looked very beautiful, although many of the trees were nearly bare. In summer it must have been perfectly lovely, as Aryenis said, and even now the splashes of russet and crimson among the barer trees made a very gorgeous contrast to the more sombre pines.

"It was very kind of you, Aryenis, to think of this handsome gift. It really was a surprise, and one that I appreciated tremendously."

"A gift for a gift," said she. "But ours is only a little one, whereas yours to me is the greatest that man or woman can give and beyond all repayment. But we hoped that perchance some day in battle our gift might give you life as you gave me, and so indirectly we would repay like with like. I'm so glad you're pleased."

"You say 'the greatest gift man or woman can give,' Aryenis. Could any one else give a greater — a fairy prince, for instance?"

Aryenis looked out over her horse's ears. Then, rather reflectively:

"A fairy prince or a fairy princess might give something bigger. Yes; if they were the right ones with the right marks, something much bigger, because it would mean not only life, but lots and lots more."

"I wish I were a fairy prince, then. I should like to give such a gift as you speak of."

"Perhaps you will be some day — when you meet the princess — or — when you *know* she is the princess."

"When I've seen the mark on her shoulder, for instance?"

Aryenis reflected again.

"Perhaps. If she had one. But then you might have difficulty in seeing it; she mightn't like to show it. You said yourself that women didn't like having marks. And all fairy princesses are women."

"And are all women fairy princesses?"

"They ought to be sometime to some man who knows how to be a fairy prince."

"Don't you think every man could play that part to the right sort of princess?"

"Yes, I do. Only not if he had gone bad, which is a man's way of growing up. Only the kind that don't grow up can be fairy princes."

"Have we grown up, then, Wrexham and Forsyth and I?"

Aryenis did not reflect this time. She said straight off without any previous consideration:

"No. You have none of you grown up, not even Forsyth, though I think he likes to pretend that he has. As for you, Harilek, you will never grow up, however long you live."

"How can you tell whether men have grown up — Shahzadi?"

"I like it when you call me Shahzadi; it sounds nice. How do I tell when men are grown up? Oh, in lots of ways. Whether they like toys is one thing."

"What do you call 'toys'?"

"Oh, horses, armour, bows and arrows, games, and things like that."

"And what other things?"

Aryenis reflected again, contemplating the distant hills and the snow.

"How they speak to women sometimes. Most of all, how they treat a woman and how they look at her."

"And how do *you* think they ought to treat women?"

"Well, like you all treated me when I first came to you. I wasn't exactly got up for a party." She blushed a little. "And you all treated me just as if I had been wearing my most ordinary frocks, and then you turned out of your tent and lived in the cold wind outside, and gave me your best clothes — rather ragged ones they were.

"And after that you spoke to me always as if I were a princess, and got up when I came to meals, and generally danced attendance on me hand and foot, and your men did just what you do, and servants can't change quickly. They do what they have been accustomed to see their masters doing for a long time.

"So I was sure none of you had grown up. I knew that when you were untying me behind the rock while Payindah was shooting. I was very frightened, but a woman has to think awfully quickly sometimes, and I knew before even you'd got my arms free that *you* hadn't grown up, anyway."

"You must judge very quickly, Shahzadi. How do you do it?"

"Every woman does, and perhaps I am quicker than most. You see I could tell from your eyes that, although you were trying to be very businesslike, you were really feeling even shyer than I was, so I knew it was all right."

"Thank you, Shahzadi. You give us good characters in fact."

"Quite good. All of you, though Forsyth was really too clever at doing my hair for a little thing that hasn't grown up."

"He has several sisters."

"Sisters!" said Aryenis scornfully. "I wouldn't like Stephnos to do my hair. He'd pull it out by the roots. But

I wouldn't mind Forsyth doing it every day. Sisters! Other people's, perhaps!"

"That's just what I said, and then he got quite annoyed."

"Which shows that he hasn't grown up too much yet."

I came to the conclusion that Aryenis was not a bad judge of character. She is certainly amazingly observant.

After about two hours we overtook and passed the baggage horses, and I think Payindah got the shock of his life when I rode past him complete in mail and steel cap. Temra appeared surprised, but also, I fancied, pleased, and greeted me in the same words that the escort had used, apparently a set phrase for such an occasion.

Presently, up a low hill in front, I saw a long white blur — a largish town — and Aryenis, with her eyes gleaming, pointed it out.

"Miletis, Harilek. In another hour or so we shall be home." She whispered the last word to herself again.

We rode up the hillside among the fields and fruit trees and the scattered villages, and every now and then women and children and men at the roadside would wave to Aryenis with cries of joy.

"Look, there are people riding down the road," she said, as we came round a bend under the mulberries. "I believe — yes, it is — it's Ziné come to meet me."

She put her mare into a canter and then into a gallop, and went off like an arrow.

Coming down toward us was a little group of people on horseback. There was a girl in front riding with a tall man on a big roan — big, that is, as the Sakae horses go. Behind them were other mounted men, grooms, and archers.

The girl had evidently recognized Aryenis about the same time, and swept down on her. The two pulled up as they met, and as we reached them they were off their horses — which we caught just in time — laughing and crying in each other's arms.

The tall man dismounted, and flung his reins to one of his escort. Then, holding out both hands to Aryenis, he drew

her to him when he had disentangled her from the other girl, and kissed her on the forehead. All three were talking rapidly and excitedly in their own language. I stood holding my pony's reins in the background, and I think none of them thought of me for a couple of minutes at least. Then the elderly man noticed me, and said something to Aryenis, who turned round and called me. Speaking in Greek, she introduced him to me as her uncle, Kyrlos's brother, Milos.

He knew all about us, for Kyrlos had sent off a letter by a swift mount the afternoon Aryenis had returned, and another with more detail next day. He thanked me in much the same way as Kyrlos had done, and asked after my wound. I explained that it was practically healed, and that the bandage would be off in a day or two. Then Aryenis presented me to Ziné, a pretty girl with dark-brown hair. The picture we had found had not been too flattering.

We mounted again and rode on up to the city, the two girls talking hard in front, and Milos and I behind them. He asked me details of our adventures as we rode along, speaking slowly in Greek. I could see he was looking at my dress curiously from time to time, and at last he asked me whence I got it, so I told him.

"I thought I knew the helmet," he said, "though it is years since I have seen it. So Paulos sends you to war in his mail, does he? You could not carry a better man's arms if you searched the whole land. One of the bravest, and there be many brave men in our country. And from what I have heard you also have some claim to be counted in their number. Kyrlos wrote me a full account."

The Sakae had a very straightforward manner of talking, and seemed to say exactly what they thought. It was clear that their long residence in Asia had not tinged them with Asiatic indirectness of speech.

Like Paulos, he displayed great interest in our weapons, and wanted me to show him how they fired. We had to make a rule after that not to fire except in case of need, for ammunition was precious, and we did not know how long we

were going to be in Sakaeland. So we spread the story that we never fired them except in actual battle or for practice, it being considered unlucky to do so. Otherwise I think we should have got through our ammunition in the first week.

Miletis was a large edition of Aornos: the same long granite walls, the same high gates, and the same broad clean streets, lined for the most part with fruit trees. It stood at one side of a long hill above the river, and beyond it the hills climbed to meet the lower slopes of Saghar Mor, whose snow-peaks towered above us some twenty-five miles away. They rose in long rolling slopes, covered with ilex and pine, and higher up with thick fir forest and rhododendron groves, aflame in summer with gorgeous scarlet blossoms. Most of the wealthier inhabitants have country villas in the higher hills, where they spend the hottest of the summer months.

We got the same shower of greetings as we had at Aornos, but even more noticeable here in Aryenis's own city, and we progressed very slowly through the crowded street.

At the north end of the town we came to a wide open space, and on the farther side saw the white stone walls of Kyrlos's palace, overlooking the river. They were loopholed and crenellated, and there was a guard at the gate; but the whole look of the place was peaceful, and the great doors stood wide open. It was clearly not the home of one who ruled his people by fear. In the gateway was a throng of folk — archers in uniform keeping back the crowd, archers in undress, servants, men, and women — all hurrying to greet their mistress, whom they had believed dead.

They swarmed about Aryenis's horse and kissed her hands, shouting, cheering, the women throwing her handfuls of winter flowers, until finally we pulled up at the big sweeping marble stairway that led up to the main building, and there they simply mobbed her.

There were old grey-bearded men in the fawn tunics, evidently officials of sorts, hurrying down the stairs; some younger men in mail, doubtless officers there on business

connected with the war; women servants with their short full skirts and embroidered short-sleeved bodices; grooms; indoor servants; two falconers; and an apple-visaged old woman, shrill-tongued, with keen old eyes, in heavily embroidered white clothes with turquoise-studded silver necklace and bangles, pushing her way through the crowd.

Aryenis sat on her horse in the middle of them, laughing and smiling, and once, I think, furtively wiping away tears from her eyes as she tried to shake hands with about a dozen people per hand at once.

Then the old woman forced her shrill way to the front, and Aryenis slipped from the saddle to be smothered in her old nurse's ample embrace.

After that she emerged from the throng, I don't know quite how, and going up three steps waved the people back, calling for silence, which she quickly got. All Miletis seemed to do exactly what she told it. And while she stood there two great deerhounds leapt down the steps and fawned about her, jumping up to lick her hands. Then she petted them, and made them lie down at her feet.

When there was silence, she proceeded to make a speech, which, although I could not understand, I gathered was a short résumé of her adventures, for I could see the people's faces working, and grim-faced men clapping their hands to their weapons, as the silence grew and they hushed — listening to Aryenis's clear voice.

Then she stopped (I discovered later that she had just told them about the old chief's death in the gate).

"Harilek," she called, looking at me over the heads of the crowd, who turned to see whom she was speaking to — "Harilek; come up here and stand by me while I talk to my people."

So I slipped off my pony, giving it to the nearest man, and pushed my way through the crowd, who made way for me in silence, looking at me, doubtless wondering who I was. I walked up the steps to where she stood, the deerhounds at her feet, with the throng of servants and soldiers, men and

women of all kinds in front, and the little circle of grave-visaged elders and mail-clad officers just above her.

"Stand there and let them see you, Harilek; I want them to know you. I'm going on talking."

And on she went. She was evidently telling of her escape now, for the crowd began to cheer, while the men threw their caps into the air and the women shrilled their applause and clapped their hands softly in Sakae fashion.

Then suddenly, in her rather dramatic way, she stopped, turned, and pointed to me, standing there like a fool in Paulos's mail with my bandaged face.

After that they mobbed us both, while the old lady nearly wrung my hands off, and I was glad when we got up the stairway to the building. Just as we reached the doors, Aryenis turned on me with eyes suspiciously bright and, I think, slightly moist.

"Welcome, Harilek, to the home I'd never have seen again except for you."

And so we entered the wide doors, with Ziné and Milos behind us, and the deerhounds walking on either side of Aryenis trying to lick her hands.

CHAPTER XVIII

A SHAMAN RAID

THAT afternoon I rode out with Milos to look at some of his men, and as we rode he talked to me about his people and about their wonderful cliff-girt land, for Nature, not content with setting the great desert around Sakaeland, had girdled it further with a precipitous wall of cliff, that now higher, now lower, circles the whole country. There being no incentive to make a way down to the desert, none has ever been made, as doubtless would have happened had the surrounding country been fertile instead of being hundreds of miles of trackless sand-dunes.

The Sakae impressed me more and more. They were not unlike Pathans in their free independence, but it was tempered with a certain respect for authority which I have never seen out of England or the countries sprung from her, since it was by no means the servile respect of subject races. As we rode back to the city there was a good deal of traffic coming in — horsemen, bullock-waggon, droves of cattle, and sheep. Between the in and out gates stood a tall, yellow-haired archer on duty directing the stream. He did not shout or gesticulate or beat folk ineffectively after the manner of the East. He just spoke quietly to all, but, whether they were coarse-clad bullock-drivers, or chiefs in mail with mounted retinues, they did exactly as he told them.

Watching him as we halted for a moment to let an outcoming drove of sheep pass, I could not help thinking that, in spite of the great grey gates, with the mail-clad bowmen sliding to and fro on top, their arms glittering in the sun, the quaint, heavily laden bullock-waggon, the loose-smocked men and the full-skirted, bareheaded women, the droves of cattle along the sunlit poplar-lined road, there was hardly

any difference between the mail-clad archer's and the crowd's common atmosphere and that to be observed around any blue-coated policeman at any busy plate-glass-fronted corner in London.

Just as we reached the cross-roads near the place there was a stir and a bustle on the far side, and out through the crowd rode Stephnos, Wrexham, and their men. The people seemed excited, and as we drew nearer I saw that the party looked weary, their horses tucked up, and mud splashed more than a simple road journey justified. But when we met, I understood, for some of the men had blood on their mail; one, with his arm swathed in a blood-clotted bandage, was being supported in the saddle by a comrade, while two mounted men were leading horses whose empty saddles were hung with mail and gear.

Evidently they had found the enemy.

"Hulloa, John," said I as Milos greeted Stephnos, the crowd surging about us seeking news from the men. "You seem to have bumped them all right. What's happened?"

"Hulloa, Harry; didn't recognize you in that get-up. Raid. D——d swine! However, we caught 'em in the end, eight miles over the border, and dusted the floor with them pretty usefully. Firoz is chucking a hell of a chest because he laid out six to his own gun, all stiffs, too. That mail shirt is off one of them."

I remarked Firoz then — in a mail shirt — riding with an N.C.O., who was talking rapidly to a tall, red-haired, brown-skirted girl holding his stirrup leather. By the flat silver bangle above her right elbow I judged she was his wife, a conjecture which proved correct. The unmarried women among the Sakae wear no bangles above the right elbow, while the engaged girls have a little thin one of silver wire.

The crowd pressed about them listening, and I could see them looking at Firoz, his rifle slung across his saddle bow, with admiring eyes; and, as the speaker stopped and pointed to Firoz's rifle, the red-haired girl and the women near clapped their hands softly.

Milos and Stephnos rode on, and we followed them, many of the crowd, especially the women and above all the small urchins, moving with us.

"D——d glad we're going to have a biff at the Shaman blokes," said Wrexham. "After what I've seen to-day, I'm all for wiping them out. Tell you about it as soon as I've washed the dust out of my throat."

We clattered into the great courtyard and dismounted, the men riding on to their quarters with Firoz among them, the red-haired girl still walking by the big N.C.O. Wrexham and Stephnos went off to wash, demanding instant food and drink, especially drink. Milos and I joined them later in the big dining-hall, where they were taking the edge off their appetite with bread and cold meat; and while Stephnos, between mouthfuls, recounted the story to Milos, Wrexham gave me his version.

"After we'd had breakfast at Aornos yesterday," said Wrexham, refilling his glass, "we rode on ten miles or so to a frontier fort — place called Takos, very much like the one we went to the first day.

"Stephnos asked me if I'd care to come, and I went, as I wanted to see a bit more of the country. Also he said that there were enemy reported in the vicinity, and I'd not seen any live Shamans so far. He took twenty men with him, and I took Firoz along in case we ran into anything, when a second rifle would be handy.

"When we got to Takos, the fellow commanding there said that there was nothing doing as yet, but that some friendly Green Sakae had come in and reported having seen Shaman horsemen moving about in their country.

"The afternoon was getting on by that time, for we'd not gone very fast, and so Stephnos decided to stop there, and the bloke in charge fixed us all up for the night.

"It was a regular mediæval sort of a show — rather like what you've told me about the Punjab frontier. They shut the place up at dusk, and after the evening meal we went up on top of the keep and talked a bit. There was a big

beacon in an iron cage stacked ready for lighting, and a small pot of burning charcoal and torches all handy.

"The sentries were along the parapet, four of 'em with their bows and half a dozen arrows laid out ready on the coping. Seemed a businesslike crowd with good discipline.

"Stephnos told me if nothing occurred we'd ride straight here in the morning, after he'd looked around a bit. I fancy he was hoping something would happen. He's a bit of a thruster, Master Stephnos, and I could see he was itching to push a sword into some one. Good lad that."

He looked across at Stephnos, who was talking to his uncle, the last rays of the sinking sun sweeping through the window on to his young keen face, with the dancing blue eyes — very steady now, though, as he talked — and the bobbed yellow locks. Save for the different colouring and the masculine features, he was amazingly like Aryenis.

"Well, we went down and turned in, for it gets pretty parky now after dark. I talked a little to Stephnos, but it's not too easy as yet. I wish I could patter Greek like you birds. However, we were both pretty sleepy, and it didn't take us long to get off.

"Somewhere about four we woke up, hearing a lot of noise upstairs. Then down came one of the men with a lantern and jabbered something to Stephnos, who jumped out of bed and started pulling on his kit.

"I asked him what was up, and he said that the sentries reported fire in the distance. We hurried on our clothes and ran upstairs. There we found the officer man and several N.C.O.'s all looking out to the north, where some miles away — we were on a bit of hill — there was a big flare in the sky.

"They bucked a bit — which, of course, I couldn't understand — and then Stephnos told me they thought it was a raid.

"About ten minutes later we heard horses' hoofs on the stones below, and then the sentries at the lower gate challenged. Then we heard the gate being opened, and after that men coming up the stone stairs.

They came up into the light of the torches on the platform below us, a couple of soldiers and another chap — a local by the look of him — splashed with mud and covered with dust, and still breathing hard.

“He talked to the officer for about half a minute, and then an N.C.O., who was listening, ran to the beacon with a torch and lit it. Soaked in oil, I fancy, for it went up in a blaze straight off.

“The officer turned and said something to Stephnos, and they talked for a few seconds and then the officer shouted out some orders, an N.C.O. blew a whistle, down below from the lower gate some one sounded a horn, and then I heard the men below turning out. Pretty slick they were, for five minutes later, looking down from the parapet, I saw them leading out the horses. The whole place was red light now from the blazing beacon.

“I asked Stephnos what was up, and he said an enemy party had got through the line of posts and raided a village about six miles away — the one we could see blazing. The man who had just galloped in was a watchman from the next village. They seemed to have a regular system of alarm-posts, for five minutes after our beacon went up there were two more twinkling away to the south of us.

“Stephnos said he was taking his men and twenty more from the fort and going off at once to the village. Firoz had come up by this time, anxious to know what it was all about, so I told him to come along, too.

“Ten minutes later we were in the saddle and away down the track. It was too dark to canter; there was only just the last bit of the moon.

“The dawn was breaking when we got close to the village, and Stephnos checked a minute while his scouts nosed round. Then one of them came galloping back and said something to him, and we pushed on again.

“He told me the enemy had gone, and the scouts were out on the far side of the village. It was just light enough to see as we rode in, but the glare of the burning ricks, and the

light from such of the thatched roofs as had not fallen in, gave us enough to see without the daylight.

"Stephnos's horse shied at a dead man lying across the path, and then we pulled up in the middle of the village.

"Quite a small place — a few houses, most of 'em of mud bricks with thatched roofs, the usual crowd of cattle-shelter and some wooden barns, now well alight.

"The enemy had wrecked it pretty usefully. About everything that could burn was burning. The men were looking around for some one alive, but it was a long time before they found anything but stiff 'uns. The Shaman seem to be pretty fair devils. I counted a dozen dead bodies lying near me, including three women, and I expect there were more in the houses. One of them had a kid, too — quite dead.

"Then two of the men came up leading an old dame with white hair, whom they'd found hiding somewhere. The poor old soul was in a frightful state, of course. But she recovered a bit after Stephnos spoke to her, and told him that the raiders had not been gone long. I noticed one of the fellows with her was pretty agitated, and I discovered afterwards that he was one of the men from the fort and his girl was in the village — poor devil. He was pretty near off his head when we'd done searching the place and found no more people alive.

"Then Stephnos started us off again. The lad was breathing hard through his teeth. I don't think he'd seen much of this sort of thing, and he was white hot to catch up with the swine.

"We pushed on over the border, and just after the sun rose ran into a little group of Green Sakae, rather harried-looking, hiding in some undergrowth. They told us that a party of Shaman raiders, about a hundred, with some women, had passed some time before — going toward the Shaman country, they thought.

"We went on, and before we'd gone another mile we saw one of the scouts off his horse standing by the roadside.

When we reached him the fellow I'd noticed before with the old woman, who was riding just behind Stephnos and me, gave a great cry, leapt off his pony, and went down on his knees by the scout, who I then saw was standing by a woman's body under a little bank. As we pulled up I saw she'd had a spear or a knife driven in under her ribs.

"We all stood back a bit, then, when we understood. The scout got on his horse and cantered off after the others. The men were all pretty mad when we left the village, but this stopped them talking altogether. I could see them fiddling with their sword-hilts.

"It was full daylight now, and the hills stood out clear ahead in the rising sun, and there in front of us the man on his knees *talking* to the girl. Then Stephnos, who was off his horse, stepped up to him and said something, signalling to the rest of us to ride on.

"A minute later he came up — his face rather white — and halted us.

" 'There is only one path they can take here through the hills. There is a forest ahead, and I'm going to try and get in front. They cannot move very fast with the women. They're stronger than we probably, from what we heard, and may hold us off and get away. But if we can get to the pass first we can shoot them down in an ambush, and then they won't have time to hurt the women.'

"Then he turned off the track and struck across country at a canter. As we went off, the man whose girl had been killed came up and joined us, and I saw that he had a thick lock of her hair knotted about his wrist. He rode without speaking, looking straight ahead. We went hard about six miles through some woods, and came out at the foot of the hills with one of the fort men guiding us.

"There was nothing much moving in the country, and we passed near no villages. We went on up into the hills; they were low ones, covered with scrubby bushes and small thorn-trees, dotted about with bigger trees above.

"At last we came back on to the road, where it ran into a

steepish sort of place rather like a cutting with high banks, only natural. The guide ran down on to the road, and I saw he was looking for tracks, but as he found none we knew we were ahead of the enemy.

"Then Stephnos started laying an ambush for them. The horses were led away beyond us into some thick stuff, and tethered to the trees in a dip below us. Then he put out twenty men, some on either side of the road up to where it dipped down again, all of them hidden among the trees and bushes.

"'Will you and your man stop here? You can kill with your weapons as they come up. But let them get well into the trap. I with the rest will be hidden a little way down the hill, so as to get in behind them.'

"Then he disappeared.

"We waited about half an hour, and then the lookout fellow reported that the raiders were approaching. From where I was I could get a good view of the road below us for about five hundred yards. Firoz was just beside me, and on either hand were the men, each with his bow ready, very quiet.

"We heard the noise of horses in front, and then the party came round the turn at a walk, some riding, some on foot. There were mounted men in mail shirts in front with a couple of scouts ahead, but not far enough. I suppose they thought they were safe now in the Green Sakae country. Anyway, they walked slap into it as we lay doggo.

"They were pretty close when I heard Stephnos's horn sound, and there was sudden confusion among the packed men in the road. Then, as the fellows on either side leapt up and opened with their bows, Firoz and I let drive at the two scouts, who were a bare fifty yards from us.

"That part lasted a very few minutes. I suppose the first twenty men went down. They were all in a heap bristling with arrows, the horses kicking and plunging. A few tried to gallop up to the top of the rise, and Firoz and I had a pretty minute's rapid into them. None of them got within fifty

yards of us except two loose horses, and another dragging its rider, who got through us and disappeared. Then we heard the fun beginning on Stephnos's side, and the N.C.O. shouted something. The next minute we were down the slope and going for them.

"These Blue Sakae are real peaches. I've never seen fellows go in so quick. The Shamans tried to collect, but what with wounded horses careering round and arrows still coming down from the men on the flanks, we were into them before they could form. Just as we got to the bottom I caught sight of Stephnos's fellows coming down beyond them, and saw some women at the back.

"There were really only fifty-odd enemy — we counted fifty-two after, and I don't think any got away, and we knocked over nearly thirty before we started down, while Stephnos's fellows were shooting after that. When we got in there was a pretty little scurry.

"A big hook-nosed fellow came for me — I'd taken to my pistol now — and I pushed him over. Just to my right was the N.C.O. hard at it sword to sword with a man in a leather coat. Then the N.C.O. got home, and the chap sort of fell over him in a heap. While he was trying to clear his sword another raider rushed him with a knife.

"I couldn't lend a hand at the moment, as I was busy with a black-bearded fellow, who materialized on my left with a sword, and I thought the N.C.O. was a goner.

"I blew my gentleman's face in at about three feet, and his sword ripped my sleeve up and scratched my arm as he caught it and crumpled. Next time I go to one of these beans I'm borrowing a mail shirt."

He held up his arm, and I saw then that his coat-sleeve was ripped up and the shirt below all mottled with blood.

"I didn't notice that. Is it deep?"

"No; nothing. Tied it up with a handkerchief afterwards, and it stopped at once. However, to get back to the N.C.O. As my bloke toppled over, I saw Firoz's rifle-barrel come over the N.C.O.'s shoulder as he struggled to get his sword

clear. The new man was just lunging when Firoz sort of blew him away from the muzzle. He spun round and collapsed with most of the back of his head missing.

"The next thing that happened was my running into Stephnos, with a white set face, blood all over his sword and arm, looking round for something more to kill, so I gathered the show was about over.

"There was a worry going on under the bank, where two of the enemy had got their backs to a big rock, and four of our fellows were finishing them. Beyond us some of the men were freeing the women, who were tied to the horses. Luckily none of them had got hit, and the enemy had been too rushed to hurt them. Others were tying up wounded men, and some more were holding prisoners. The whole place was littered with bodies of men and horses, many with arrows sticking in 'em.

"I looked round for the soldier whose girl had been killed, and presently I found him. He was on top of a big fellow in a mail shirt, and he had his teeth in the man's throat. By his side was his sword, broken off below the hilt. A couple of men were pulling him clear as I came up.

"They lifted him off — the Shaman was dead as mutton — and looked him over, and he came to as they did. He had taken something in the body, I think the Shaman's sword, and he was pretty near gone, but we tried to fix him up. I think he had gone right off his head, for he lay there taking no notice of us, and talking to some one we couldn't see, stroking the lock of hair round his wrist and smiling. Stephnos, who came up in the middle, said he was still talking to the girl. I hope he was really. He looked as if he could see her until his eyes shut, and then in another minute he was gone.

"The men had seven live prisoners, five of them wounded. The rest were all dead, and if Stephnos hadn't stopped his men they would have finished these fellows, too. Personally, after what I'd seen, *I* wouldn't have stopped them, and I wondered why he did. I understood afterwards.

"There were six women and a certain amount of gear on the pack-horses. We gathered up the enemy's mail and weapons and such ponies as were worth keeping. Then we mounted the women on the quietest ones and started back.

"We reached the village again about midday, for Stephnos was in a hurry to get back. We had lost four fellows killed and four more pretty badly wounded, as well as lighter cases; but we got off cheap, considering we'd killed forty-five of them. Of course, the arrows and the rifles laid out the majority of them straight off.

"We brought the dead and wounded back on the horses; had to strap 'em on. When we got to the village, we found it full of troops from the fort clearing up the mess, and men from the surrounding villages, as well as some of the villagers, who'd managed to get away in the dark when the raid happened. They had got the fires pretty well under, and had found some burnt bodies in the burnt-out houses.

"As I said, the Shamans are fair swine.

"We found an elderly white-haired gent in charge, who greeted us as we rode in. Stephnos introduced me, and told me he was the chief of those parts. We halted a bit there, and Stephnos handed him over the prisoners, since the raid was in his district.

"The old gent had them marched up to where the bodies were laid out. Then he got hold of six of the oldest men present — sort of jury, I fancy — and they stood in a row behind him. He talked to the prisoners a little — the soldiers had their work cut out keeping the villagers off them — and I think he was questioning them, but they didn't seem to have much to say.

"When he'd finished, the crowd round were listening very quietly. He turned round after that, and spoke to his six old men, asking them something, and they all nodded in turn.

"Then he turned his hand over — so — and the guard, who'd been standing handy with ropes, ran the prisoners up to the nearest trees without any talkee, talkee. Good quick

work. As we rode away, I saw all seven dangling limp against the background of burnt-out houses, with the kites wheeling round them already. I understood then why Stephnos had brought them back. He told me that in this country justice is always carried out on the scene of the crime, if possible, or somewhere near it.

"I asked him if they killed all prisoners. He said no; but this was murder, not war, since they had killed the women and the children. I quite agreed with him. After finding that wretched girl on the road, I'd have stood by and watched even if he'd wanted to boil 'em alive in oil.

"We dropped the fort detachment and one of our men, who was rather bad, at the village — the rest of the badly wounded belonged to the fort people — and came on here as fast as we could go. The horses were a bit done by that time, and we had an hour's halt on the way.

"It was quite a bright little show one way and another, and young Stephnos has the makings of a very useful soldier. He handled the ambush business a treat, and brought his men in pretty nippy when we rushed them. And that's our story. What have you been doing? You've got no end of a rig-out. And where's Alec?"

I told him of our adventures, the little matter of the Shaman envoy, and the various things I heard since we parted the previous morning.

"By the way," I finished, "I've met Ziné — the lady of the picture. She's here now."

"Is she as nice-looking as the picture?" asked Wrexham.

"Yes, quite, I should say, although I've not seen it of late."

Milos turned to us, speaking slowly in Greek:

"Your friend was fortunate this morning, it seems, getting off with only a scratch. It was good work catching the whole party of raiders. In one way the raid is fortunate, since, if there be any of our people doubtful about the wisdom of making war, this will show them its necessity. It is the first time the Shamans have entered our borders on such a scale."

"When is the council to be held?" I asked.

"To-morrow before midday in the great hall. Perhaps you and your friends would like to come, although you will not be able to understand the talk, since it will be in our own language. But Stephnos will be able to tell you what we are saying."

"We should like to come very much if we may," I said.

Just at that moment horses clattered up in the dusk outside, and we heard shouting and trample of feet. Then horses being led away and voices, and Kyrlos and Forsyth came in. The former, who had heard something of the raid on his way in, was anxious for details, and Stephnos had to tell the story all over again as Kyrlos sat warming his feet at the fire. He was very pleased at the account, and congratulated Stephnos, and also Wrexham for his share in the day's work.

Then the others went away to change their travel and battle-stained clothes, and Kyrlos and I were left by the fire. He looked at my mail, and smiled in his slow way.

"I called on Paulos for a few minutes as I rode by this morning," he said, "and he told me he had fitted you out in his old mail. It suits you well, and if you bear it as bravely as he did, you will have much honour. I have ordered gear for your friends and your men, which will be ready to-morrow. If you ride in our wars, it is but fitting that we should arm you after our fashion."

"They will be very pleased, Kyrlos, I am sure. Wrexham told me just now that he would like mail in the next fight, and his man already wears some that he took from a Shaman he killed."

"Yes. We picked up two of Stephnos's men on the road, who told us something of what happened. They were very full of talk of your friend and his man. The latter apparently saved the life of Stephnos's head N.C.O., and it was seen by several. My people set great store by such matters, considering them greater passports to consideration than birth or wealth."

"Our people are also of the same mind. Indeed, Kyrlos, the more I see of the Sakae, the more I think of my own folk. When there is more time I must ride over and talk with Paulos, who, it seems, has many old books. I think there must be some kinship between your folk and mine from the old, old days."

"He will be pleased to have one with whom he can talk of the past, for he is a great student. But 'tis time we changed, I think. Certain of our chiefs will eat with us to-night."

When I went up to our rooms I found Forsyth listening enviously to Wrexham's story. Also Firoz — still in his captured mail — outside the door chatting to Payindah, and the latter lamenting that he had not taken the trouble to collect a mail shirt in the gate. Both, however, were rejoicing at the opportunity of striking another blow at the Shamans, to whom they had taken the most violent dislike. They cheered up still further when I told them that they would get new clothes next day, for in their faded frayed khaki and worn *poshtins* they were not able to swagger nearly as much as their hearts desired.

CHAPTER XIX

PAULOS DOES SOME THOUGHT-READING

DINNER that night was a lengthy affair. There were some dozen lesser chiefs, as well as various officials and their wives, good-looking women for the most part.

I had the luck to find myself by Aryenis, while Ziné was sandwiched between Wrexham and Forsyth. On my other hand was a youngish man named Andros, broad of shoulder and square of chin, very soldierly looking, and a cultured talker. He had many questions to ask about our country, our weapons, and so on. Later he transferred his attention to Wrexham, inquiring about the morning's fight, and I got a chance of asking Aryenis who the different people were.

"Has your uncle no children?" I asked, after she had pointed out the notabilities.

"No; none. It is a great sorrow to him to have no son to assist him in ruling the country. The young chief sitting on your right now helps him. He is a distant cousin of ours, and a great friend of mine."

I regarded my neighbour with more interest after that, for I wondered if he was Aryenis's "might be" fairy prince. He was good-looking enough, anyway, with his manly features, light brown hair, and keen blue eyes.

Then, seeing that he was busy trying to follow Wrexham's rather halting Greek, she went on more boldly:

"He is really *very* nice, you know. Don't you think he looks it?"

"Yes, he does certainly. Is he a soldier, too?"

"Yes; but these last two years he's been helping my uncle instead of living in one of the border forts, which is where most of the soldiers begin. My father says it's good for them, as they learn their work and keep out of mischief, as he calls

it. I think Ziné and I and our friends are supposed to be the mischief!"

"It is possible to imagine such a thing," said I, looking down the table to where Ziné was smiling at some remark of Forsyth's. He was evidently using his Greek to best advantage, and I felt sorry for John, stammering military commonplaces to Andros. I don't know why I should have felt sorry, because Wrexham had never appeared to hanker much after feminine society during the years I had known him. But then they were generally years where the said society was limited to Flemish billet ladies or upon occasion to shrill-tongued Easterns with grievances. Still, after all, he was the original finder of Ziné's picture and the cause of our meeting the lady.

After dinner we sat in the great hall and some of the guests sang to us, rather pleasing music, very Western in type. Two of the women accompanied them on small stringed instruments not unlike guitars. The airs were for the most part familiar to the audience, judging by the way they took up the refrains. Of course, we could not follow the words, which were all in Sakae, but one that Andros sang was obviously some kind of fighting song.

When the applause had died away, he went up to Aryenis and asked her to sing. She seemed doubtful either about singing or else as to what song she should choose, for they talked together quite a time. Eventually she got up and sang to his accompaniment — he was obviously a master of the instrument, which he took from one of the ladies.

Aryenis's voice — a full soprano — was worth going a long way to listen to, and she knew how to use it, for she filled the whole great hall, while the rustle and buzz of conversation died away and a still silence settled as she began.

I have heard her sing this particular song often since, and, as the words pleased me when I learnt something of the language, I used to sing it myself after the manner of the unmusical male — namely, in my bath. I made a rough verse translation of it, which gives the meaning pretty accurately:

A SONG OF LIFE

I believe in life and in all it holds
Of beauty and joy and love,
In the flowers that dream in my garden gay,
And the glittering snows above.
In the sweet fresh breath of dawn in spring —
Rose hills in the sunset light —
In the moon peeping out from her spangled veil,
In the warm scented summer night.

In play I believe, in sport and game,
In the call of the swift foot pack;
In the arrow's flight and the sword-blade's kiss,
In the hoofs drumming down the track.
In the stress of work that makes our world,
In the days of the tautened trace;
In the task that we finish clean and fair,
With a laugh in Death's dark face.

I believe in the friendships held so dear,
Children's laughter and men's grave smiles,
In the pleasures shared and the sorrows halved,
In the thoughts that bridge the miles.
But love is the pivot that swings the whole,
The molten heart of the glow,
Just a man and a woman — all in all —
That's God's heaven for us below.

The music was pregnant with life, and Aryenis sang it as if she meant every word of it. When she finished, there was a low hum of applause — the real thing.

She came over and sat down by Milos and me.

"Did you like the tune of that?" she asked.

"Very much, Aryenis."

"I'm glad. It's rather a nice thing that Paulos composed. I'll write you out the words in Greek one day. It's all about life and what life ought to be like. It's a wonderful thing to have been written by a cripple. The music is Andros's. He's clever, isn't he?"

"Yes. Is he as good at other things, too?"

"I think there's nothing Andros can't do," said Milos. "He's one of the best riders I know; quite the finest shot with a bow in the whole clan, and last year he carried off the prize for the best man at arms in our weapon show. He's a good leader in war, and popular with everybody under him. A good musician, and — though he's shy about it — somewhat of a poet."

"You're fortunate in having a man like that under you," said I. "Aryenis was telling me that he helps you a good deal."

"Yes. He's getting more and more my right-hand man. Under Kyrlos and myself most of the preparations for this war have been made by him. He's got a good head on his shoulders, which does not always go with the more showy qualities."

Then he turned to Aryenis.

"Will you finish the evening for us with that little song of Andros's? I have not heard it for quite a long time, and you used to sing it a lot."

"If you like, uncle mine. If Andros will play it for me, that is."

Milos called to Andros, asking him to play again, and Aryenis sang a little short ballad with a very haunting refrain. If I could write verse as Andros does, I wouldn't be shy about it. I'd put it into print straight away and let the world see it. But still they have no press in Sakaeland, and if you have some one like Aryenis to sing your poems, then a press is worse than superfluous.

Shortly after that the guests began to leave, and we were not sorry, especially Stephnos and Wrexham, who were anxious for bed after a before-dawn start, forty miles in the saddle, and a fight.

Forsyth raved about Ziné without ceasing while he was undressing — we had put him into the second room. I don't know how many different girls she reminded him of. Eventually we threw him out of our room, and left him to rave by

himself. In the morning he was singing as he dressed. I remembered that from the time in Calcutta when we were fitting out — a bad sign — and said that he was going riding with the girls, as everybody else was busy with preparations for the council.

Wrexham and I announced our intention of going to the meeting, and so Forsyth went off with the two girls. They told us they were going to meet Milos's wife, who would be arriving about midday. I watched them ride out of the gate, Forsyth very smart for the occasion, for, if there is one thing under the sun Forsyth prefers to one pretty girl, it's two. Under the moon, however, he seems to find one sufficient. The council meeting was at ten-thirty, and shortly before that Stephnos fetched us.

The council, which met in a big room in the palace, consisted of some thirty men, heads of clan sections, and officials of different kinds. Wrexham pointed out to me the old chief who had settled with the prisoners after the raid the day before. He must have been tough for his years to have ridden in all that way and still look fresh as paint with his youthful colouring under his snow-white locks. But the Sakae are a hard crowd, and age slowly. He bowed to Wrexham as Stephnos gave us seats on carved benches ranged round three sides of the room. At the fourth was a raised dais, presently occupied by Kyrlos and his brother and two older men. On their right was seated an old man in long black robes armed with writing materials, whose business it seemed to be to take down important points during the meeting.

The chiefs around us were of varying ages, from men like Wrexham's friend to youths no older than Stephnos. Most of them were clad in ordinary everyday garments, the pleated smock-like tunics and cross-gartered leg-wear, though others were in mail. All, however, whether in mail or not, wore the short straight Sakae sword. The Sakae men are not given to much in the way of personal adornment, though here and there I sometimes notice men wearing sil-

ver bracelets, but these are the exception rather than the rule. The most common male ornament is big silver signet rings. Illiteracy among the upper classes is uncommon, but in spite of that the seal is considered as good, if not even better, than a signature. The seal engravers must be a remarkably honest folk. We were, of course, unable to follow either the opening speech which Kyrlos made or the ones that followed; but, from the hurried translations that Stephnos gave us, it appeared that Kyrlos had given a résumé of the Shaman aims, an account of their misdeeds, and emphasized the necessity of taking quick action before the Blue Sakae were overrun even as the Red and Green clans had been. Milos seconded him, and then others rose and spoke in turn.

It was clear that feeling was pretty high, judging from the guttural exclamations which greeted various passages. At last Wrexham's old chief got up and made what seemed to be a very telling speech. Apparently he was describing the raid of the day before. It was many years since there had been a raid on such a scale with a whole village practically wiped out, and the audience was obviously moved by the story.

Finally, Kyrlos spoke again, and Stephnos told us he was asking for the chiefs' opinions as to whether they were in favour of immediate war or not. There was a brief silence when he had done, and then Wrexham's chief drew his short sword and held it out point downward, and in another moment every blade in the room was bare. I could see a look of relief pass over Kyrlos's face as he drew his own weapon, and then understood that he had carried his council with him, and the war was settled.

The rest of the meeting was a discussion as to the procedure, and finally it broke up with the understanding that on that day four weeks all the fighting men of the whole clan would be assembled at Aornos and march under Kyrlos's own command into the Shaman country. Milos would remain at Miletis to carry on the affairs at home, and super-

intend the defence of the northern border if there were any attempts from the Red Sakae side.

Forsyth and the two girls came back at midday escorting Milos's wife Annais, a very stately-looking middle-aged woman. Her thick brown hair was streaked with grey, but she had kept a girl's complexion, and her chiselled features and young blue eyes, together with her beautiful figure and elastic walk, made it hard to believe that she was, indeed, as Aryenis told me, well on the wrong side of forty. She spoke to me very graciously, thanking me for helping her niece.

"We felt as if she had been given back to us from the dead when we got my brother-in-law's letter. I thank God every day that she found some brave good men to help her in her danger. I hope your face is nearly healed now, Sir Harilek?"

"The bandage comes off to-morrow, lady," said I, thanking her for her kind words.

Then Andros came up and kissed her on both cheeks, calling her "mother." I guessed then that, as indeed I found later, he was looked upon by Milos and Annais as a son, and had it been possible to dislike him I should have hated him thoroughly. But one could not dislike such a typical *preux chevalier* as Andros, courteous in speech, thoughtful in deed and manner, and as unselfishly brave as any soldier I have ever met, though six years' war has given me the acquaintance of many brave and unselfish men, such as Wrexham, for instance.

Still, I did wish most violently that he was other than he was, or else that he would produce a wife. I wished it the more ardently all the fortnight following the council when he rode daily with Aryenis, except when his duties kept him too busy.

It is true that I saw a lot of her, because he was engaged either with Kyrlos or else with other officers nearly the whole day. But he managed to find time to ride with Aryenis either morning or evening, and of course played her accompaniments after the evening meal, when we nearly always had music. Forsyth was made to produce his banjoline, and

sat both metaphorically and literally at the feet of Ziné, learning Sakae tunes and teaching her bits and snatches of *revues*.

Having no such parlour tricks I was perforce driven to conversation with the others, talking to Annais, or discussing European methods of war with Milos. Kyrlos had taken a great liking to Wrexham, and the two talked together nearly the whole time most evenings, chiefly shop about fortifications and methods of attack. The Shamans' fortress was very strong, and, even after dealing with their troops in the field, there was every possibility of a long and arduous siege before us. I think Kyrlos hoped that Wrexham, with his knowledge of strange devices of war, might produce some wonderful invention which would help him to finish off the enemy quickly. Considering how long the Sakae had been isolated, the breadth of mind possessed by the educated classes was amazing. One would have expected the most narrow-minded conservatism and prejudice, whereas, on the contrary, we found them exceptionally keen to take up any new idea.

I remember Kyrlos's disappointment when Wrexham had to explain that it was beyond his power to make rifles with the plant and labour available. They spent many hours together in Kyrlos's armouries, Stephnos following Wrexham like a shadow. About the fourth day these visits to the armoury began to grow longer, and after that we saw less and less of the pair each day. Firoz, too, was generally absent, and I saw Payindah going about much with Temra. Evidently Wrexham was evolving something, but somehow it never occurred to me to ask details, and Forsyth was far too busy with Ziné to consider anything else. As often as not the two of them went off riding with Aryenis and Andros, but I somehow think that Forsyth, who squired Ziné, was not over-careful about keeping the sections closed up too much, as the cavalry term is. I met them coming back one day, and there were a good many horse-lengths between the two sections.

Still, as I say, I did see a good deal of Aryenis — when Andros was at work. And the more I saw, the more I wanted to see, and the less could I contemplate the idea of six months' march back to settle in civilization with Aryenis in Sakaeland. On the other hand, apart from this most disturbing appearance of Andros, a factor which I judged outweighed most others, I could not conceive Aryenis in any other surroundings than below the snows of Saghar Mor among her pine forests and orchards and rose gardens. She seemed like the spirit of her beautiful land incarnate. There was snow and sunshine, blue skies, and cloud-dappled ones, the filmy mist of rain and the rippling laughter of the mountain streams, the light joyousness of the spring blossoms, and all the golden promise of late summer fruit. All these precious things were part and parcel of Aryenis's self, and now one and now another predominated. There was about her, as her song had it, the fresh breath of dawn. Was there also the sequel of the warm summer night? Unless I was utterly and hopelessly mistaken, that was there, temporarily submerged, and only waiting the touch of a kindred hand to call it up in all its deep star-spangled loveliness. Was Andros the fairy prince the touch of whose magic kiss would wake all the greater depths hidden beneath the iridescent rose mist of Aryenis's joyous girlhood, calling up those far sweeter

"Silver lights and darks undreamed of,
Where I hush and bless myself with silence"?

The more I watched, the less could I doubt it.

One morning, when every one else was occupied — Wrexham and Stephnos, hidden in the mysterious armoury along with old wrinkled-eyed smiths, amid clouds of fumes splashed with the vivid sparks of molten metal, and a deafening clangour of hammer and anvil; the two girls, with Andros and Forsyth in attendance, out riding; Kyrlos and his brother busy with affairs of State, and Annais engaged with mysterious female rites concerning linens and silks and other household business — I bethought me of Paulos.

A good horse would see me there long before the midday meal, and a quiet afternoon might soothe my sand-papered soul somewhat. We would talk of old books or of history, and, in answering his questions about the great world, which he knew only from writings centuries old, I would forget those far older, but eternally new matters which clamoured so incessantly for notice.

So I called Payindah, and told him to get horses — Kyrlos had placed the best of his stable at our disposal — and a little later, with the Punjabi, very smart in the new outfit of mail and leather which Kyrlos with the most nicely worded thanks had formally presented to him and Firoz, I was cantering down the Aornos road.

Payindah's steel cap winked in the sunshine, and as he looked my way I noticed again the chiselled silver plate in front, which I knew bore Aryenis's name. She had had that done herself for the two men, so that all who met them might know to what they owed their arms. "Some little memory of a brave deed well done," she had said to me as she gave Payindah his cap after Kyrlos had handed them the new mail jerkins.

But my cap was bare of crest or favour.

"This is a land as good as Farance, sahib," said Payindah, looking out over the countryside with its rich soil, its thick masses of trees, and the populous little villages all surrounded by fruit orchards. "It is richer than even the canal districts of the Punjab. And a good folk in it, like unto those of Farance. Brave men and masterful women, and children as stout as those of my own land. One could settle well in such a country." He looked at me closely.

"And what would you do here?" said I. "You would be in a strange land, having neither kith nor kin and no fields of your own? The people, too, are of other faith than yours, and their manners are strange. Nor even is there a mosque."

"But what is this talk of strange land and strange ways to an Awan who has soldiered for the Sirkar ¹ over half the world? Were not the people of Farance of other faith, and

¹ British Government.

there were no mosques in the country. But were we Punjabis the less at home? Last night I ate with Temra, and it was like to the billets in Farance. And his women, his wife and her sister, ate with us after the manner of those we saw in Europe."

"So Temra's wife has a sister, has she? Is she married?"

"No, though she is of full marriageable age — over-aged, we should say, in the Punjab."

"Perchance about to be married?"

"Not so. I asked Temra on the matter."

This sounded interesting, but, considering Payindah had been less than three weeks in the country, I wondered how he had contrived to get to the stage of conversation. I expect it was pretty monosyllabic. I followed up the train.

"I suppose you were thinking of seeking land here, then, and not coming back with us to the Punjab."

"But the sahibs will not go back to the Punjab. You will stay here. Forsyth Sahib will not desire to leave the Lady Ziné, nor will the Shahzadi's father wish to part with Wrexham Sahib, who is teaching his smiths many things. You will most certainly stay here as the sahibs settled in Hind in the days of the emperors, receiving land and great honours."

"You seem very certain about it all, but, even if the Shahzadi's father gets Wrexham Sahib to stop here, and Forsyth Sahib is not desirous of leaving the Lady Ziné, where do you and I come in?"

Payindah looked at me again unabashed.

"Temra and his folk took me to a wedding yesterday — one of the soldiers — and it was clear that the woman had as much voice as the man, if not more. And when it was over, we rode to the house, and upon the step was the bride's brother armed. And he spoke to the bride as though asking her whether she desired the man or not, and only when she had indicated that she would have him did he lower his sword and allow the bridegroom to enter. It is clear that these folk are as those of the sahibs' country, for the women speak sometimes as equals to the men but more often as su-

periors. So you will also remain here, for the Shahzadi will not let you go."

"You're a fool, Payindah. You talk about what you don't understand at all. And, anyhow, the Shahzadi rides nearly every day with Lord Andros."

"Then it is clear that she does not mean to marry him, for this also I saw at Béthune, where there were two French soldiers who came on leave, friends of the daughter of the house you were billeted in. And one she walked with frequently. And upon the other, with whom I talked sometimes, she looked not at all with favour. At least so it seemed. But later on, when we passed that way, he was there on leave again, and they were married."

"That may be, but it is not so here. Anyway, it does not matter, because presently I shall be going back to England, even if you all stop here; though what you will live on I don't know."

"Land," said Payindah decisively. "There is always land to get after battle, as my folk know, seeing all ours has been given us for wars. When the Shahzadi's father has destroyed the enemy, he will give land to his army after the manner of kings when they are victorious. So that if perchance we desire it we shall get it, for we are the people who will settle the war, since we alone have rifles."

He patted his .303 as I can imagine away back in the dim past his ancestors, kin, perhaps, of these same Sakae and their like — the white races who swept out over Europe till the Atlantic checked them for a few hundred years — patted their swords as they beheld the rich Punjab spread out below the gaunt frontier hills, knowing that always land lies at the grasp of him that can wield his weapons.

"And you would take land and settle here if there were opportunity?" I asked.

"May be. Never before have I desired to settle down like my folk at home. Perhaps had there been children, 'twould have been otherwise. But the Giver sent none, and then took away her who might have been their mother. So

I desired even less than before to stay settled, and as I had done before sought new faces, strange places, feeling called to wander. But now somehow I think that I will cease roaming, and stay under my own roof on my own land. Yet I do not desire to return to the Punjab."

"Well, anyway, it's a long way off, and there is a war first. After that we shall see what we shall see. Your Book says that God has bound the fate of every man about his neck. Doubtless He has fixed ours, too, and sooner or later we shall know what it is."

"Most surely He has. You and I were at the *tangi* when the Shahzadi was about to be killed, so she escaped. The Shahzadi knew of the only way up the cliffs, so that we are now in this country. Yes, undoubtedly we shall know presently what Khuda has bound about our necks."

We were riding up the lane toward Paulos's house as he spoke, and a little later we entered the trim garden. The servants ran out to take the horses, and, walking through the great hall, I found Paulos sitting in the sun in the back verandah.

He greeted me very kindly, and was, I think, pleased to see me. We breakfasted out in the verandah, and spent a quiet afternoon talking of many things in which he was interested, especially of all the countries he knew of from his readings. He showed me one or two old manuscripts, things which would have been priceless to collectors at home.

Luckily I had kept up my readings of the classics and studied the geography of the old world, and so was able to talk with some show of knowledge. Later in the afternoon we put away the past, and, turning to the present, talked of the situation in Sakaeland, of its peoples, and then inevitably passed to personalities, speaking of the different people I had met. Paulos is always tact itself, but somehow I could not help feeling that he was trying to read my thoughts when the conversation turned to Aryenis. I did not turn it there — at least I don't remember doing so — but somehow she crept in. She is hard to keep out of anything

once you have met her. And once she had entered — unbidden — Andros also came up.

"I have not seen Andros for many a day," said Paulos, "though he used to be a frequent visitor. He and Aryenis are old friends, and when she was staying with me in the spring he often rode over here."

"Friends are they?" said I.

"Why do you ask in that tone?" said Paulos, looking at me.

"Well, I have thought sometimes that they were more than friends or fast becoming so. He is one with whom any woman might desire more than friendship."

Despite the fact that I knew Paulos so slightly, there was something about the old man that called for confidence, that sort of sympathy, of community of understanding, that a character like his calls out at the very first meeting.

"Yes; you are right. There are few women that would not be only too ready to give him much more than friendship should he seek it. And yet he is always very heart-whole or seems to be so. But, with you, I have sometimes thought that his heart is not so secure where Aryenis is concerned."

"And hers?"

"It would take a far cleverer man than I to tell the state of a woman's heart, more particularly when the heart belongs to such a one as Aryenis. Frankly, I know not. This I do know, that Milos and his wife very much wish that she and Andros should make a match of it. Kyrlos also would not be ill-pleased, though, provided the man was a good one, he would welcome any one Aryenis chose, since he desires nothing but her most complete happiness."

"And you think — ?"

"I think that, of all those I know, Andros is perhaps the one I would be most pleased to give my daughter to, if I had one. But, as to whether he is the one for Aryenis, I cannot make up my mind. Both are such outstandingly good representatives of their sex that I am not sure whether they would be best matched. Light calls to dark and like to unlike all

through nature as I see it, and sometimes I think that these two are in many ways too alike for perfect mating. The greatest happiness comes more often from harmonious dissimilarity than from absolute agreement."

"Yes. I have noticed that, too. These two are not unlike in many ways."

We were both silent a little. I was looking over the trees at the great snow-peaks stabbing the cloud-flecked blue sky. Presently the white snow would turn rose-pink at the kiss of the setting sun. Some day, too, some one's kisses would wake Aryenis and send the blood mantling to her white skin. Her words came back from the firelit hall at Aornos — "I think he did once, though I'm not sure —" I clenched my hand on the carved arm of my chair, and then was aware that Paulos was studying my face, and so came back out of my thoughts.

"Aryenis would never leave this country of her birth," he said. "She loves every tree and every flower, every hill and every stream, here. Sometimes I think she is the vital essence of it."

I jumped nearly out of my chair at his words, and I'm sure he saw it.

"Of that I am certain," he went on. "Whoever marries her will have to live in our country."

"You mean she would not marry into one of the other clans," said I, not meaning that at all.

"Yes; perhaps I meant that, and also other things as well."

"Are you a magician, Paulos?"

"Harilek," said he, very gently, laying his hand on my knee, "if reading thoughts be magic, perhaps I am a magician. Your thoughts are very transparent to an old man like me, one who makes it his hobby to understand his fellows. I would sometimes that I could read Aryenis's thoughts as easily as some other folk's."

"Then, since you can read my thoughts, you may be able to read that home to me would be wherever Aryenis is."

"That, lad, I read the first time you came here. I know nothing of you, save that you saved her at the risk of your own life. But I can see clearly that you are of our own class, and, since I have long judged men, I know that your speech is true."

"And suppose, Paulos, that such a one as I — a stranger — were to make a bid for Aryenis's favour, and suppose by some miracle I got it, what, then?"

He smiled.

"You do not know our people well yet. Even in our oldest books you can read that our women marry none but those they choose. Suppose, as you say, such a one as you were to do what you have said, and let us imagine that Aryenis were willing, then none would say you nay. Also, but for you Aryenis would not be here at all now."

I rose to my feet.

"Thank you, Paulos. I came here to-day because I felt that I could talk to you straightly if so inclined. But it seems that you knew my mind before ever I opened my mouth. In a week we ride past here to the war, and I will come and see you again. I must be going now, for it gets late, and it is some way to Miletis."

"I shall look forward to seeing you whenever you come, lad. I like to see my old mail in use again, and I confess to a liking for him who wears it. I shall look to hear more news of Aryenis and of Andros. But one thing I would have you remember."

"And what is that?"

"When Aryenis was much younger I told her that my mail was waiting for her husband. That was many years ago, and, girl-like, she replied very hotly that she would never marry any one at all, and was going to look after Kyrlos and me when we were old."

He paused and looked at me, but I was silent, and presently he went on again:

"Have you ever known Aryenis forget anything in the time you have known her?"

"No," said I truthfully. "She seems to have the most wonderful memory."

"Well, then, remember this while you ride home. The day after you brought her back to her father, she wrote to me saying that she would reach Aornos shortly, and bring you to see me. And in that letter she reminded me that I had often told her that all I had was hers, which is true. Then she went on to say that she desired me to give you my old mail *as a thank offering*. She was careful to emphasize the object of the gift lest I might think there was any other reason for it. It is always well to note carefully anything that a woman emphasizes."

"Why so, Paulos?"

"Because you will often find that they mean something entirely different, and later on the knowledge may be valuable. But I hear the horses. I'm sorry I cannot read Aryen's thoughts for you. But I have told you some things which may help you to read them yourself if ever you should like to take up magic."

I had a lot of things to ponder as I rode home, but somehow I did not feel so sand-papery inside as I had been. Paulos is a most soothing person.

CHAPTER XX

I MAKE A BET WITH ARYENIS

I HAD to hurry to get back in time for the evening meal, and it was dark before I rode up the paved street into Kyrlos's palace.

Fortune sent me to sit next to Aryenis that night, an honour I had not enjoyed for the last two or three days. An Aryenis in dress of flowing silk, with low square-cut neck — the offending bandage had been removed — which showed the faultless turn of her slim throat above her beautifully modelled shoulders. Simple clothes, and but little in the way of ornament, save for the sapphire pendant on the thinnest of gold chains, which gleamed against the rose ivory of her bosom, and the little gold clasps that sparkled in the gold-flecked wealth of her auburn hair.

"And where have you been all day, Harilek?" she asked. "I was looking for you this evening to ride with me."

"I wish I had known that. But I thought you would be engaged all day, and so, as every one else seemed occupied, I rode out this morning with Payindah down the Aornos road."

"You were a long time, since you were not at breakfast, and have but just come in. How far did you go?"

"I went to see Paulos."

"You went to Paulos! You never told me that you were going! Harilek, you're getting very secretive. If you had told me, I should have ridden with you, for I have not seen him for many days."

"Well, how was I to know that you wanted to go? I thought you were riding — as usual — with Ziné and the others."

"Yes, but I'd have changed that to go and see Paulos. Besides, I promised to show you some of the nice bits in his woods, you remember."

"Yes, I remember that, all right. I have a fairly good memory, though perhaps not as good as yours."

"Why mine? What do you know about my memory?"

"Nothing very much, only Paulos was talking of it this afternoon. He said you never forgot anything."

"Oh, you were talking about me, were you? I wonder my ears didn't burn. But I thought men always talked about things and not about people. I hope Paulos was giving me a good character; was he?"

"Fair to middling. He was thought-reading most of the time, though."

"Whose thoughts? This is getting exciting."

"Mine mostly. You don't think he was able to read yours, do you?"

"I don't know. He is very clever. He might be able to read mine better than I can myself."

"Can't you always read your own, then, Aryenis?"

"Not always as well as I should like to. They get rather mixed up sometimes."

"What a confession to make! I always imagine them as sort of things like — like the mirror Forsyth gave you — very clear and sharp."

"That shows, Harilek, that you are still far from being grown up, or you would know that sometimes a woman's thoughts are the most tangled things in the world, and most tangled of all to their owner."

"Are they twisted up just now, then?"

"I'm not quite sure. Sometimes I think they are quite straightforward, and then, just as everything seems perfectly clear, I come up against the most awful bundle of knots you ever saw in your life."

"You want a magician like Paulos to untwist them for you."

"Yes, that would be very nice — if he could. But I think Paulos is not the kind of magician that would unravel knots like these."

"I wonder what sort of a magician is wanted. Perhaps

the fairy prince kind" — and I looked across the table to where Andros was making a three-cornered conversation with Forsyth and Ziné. The doctor never failed to find himself next to Ziné at every meal, which was more than I could achieve with Aryenis.

"Fairy princes never read thoughts," flashed Aryenis. "They're always far too stupid!"

I wondered if she had been quarrelling with Andros that day. It was three days since she had asked me to ride with her, and now she suddenly said she had wanted me to go out that evening.

"Are they always stupid? I thought they were supposed to be clever."

"No. They are perfect fools generally," she retorted, looking very deliberately at the trio opposite.

"That's rather bad luck on the princesses, then."

"You don't suppose they worry their heads about it, do you? There are other people in the world besides fairy princes with dragon marks, or without them, for that matter," said she loftily.

"Still in the end of the story she generally marries the prince. That's what I mean about being sorry. I wasn't insinuating that the princesses worried their pretty heads about the princes — I was merely considering the dullness of being married to some one who was a perfect fool."

"They wouldn't marry them. There's always the swineherd or some one sensible who can read thoughts in the story." This very disdainfully.

I felt crushed. "Then I shall go and be a swineherd."

"What for?"

"Why, so that the princess will think I'm sensible and able to read thoughts."

"And then what do you think she will do?"

"Marry me, I hope. Isn't that what you said she would do?"

"Well, come and tell me when the play starts. I should like to see you posing as a swineherd and pretending you

could read thoughts. I don't believe you could read any one's, certainly not a princess's."

"I'd have a good try if I got a chance."

"If *I* were a prince disguised as a swineherd, I'd *make* a chance," said Aryenis decisively.

"That is just what I intend to do — Shahzadi. I'm going to borrow a magic cap and a wand from Paulos, and start in on the thought-reading trade."

"You'll have to find some one with thoughts to read, then. How are you going to do that?"

"Quite easy. I'll begin now and read yours."

"You can't, Harilek."

"I'll wager you a pair of new riding-gloves that I can. A pair of gloves to — what shall I say? — to a piece of that mauve ribbon you wear."

"What ribbon? Oh!" She very hurriedly adjusted the shoulder of her dress.

"Will you take the bet?"

"And who's to say if you read them right? If I am not sure, who else is going to be?"

"You shall be judge. If I read them right, you will be able to untie the knots. Is it a bet?"

She considered. "Yes. I want a pair of gloves."

"You're very sure of winning?"

"Of course I am. Go on, magician."

"Well, at present you're thinking of the war."

"We're all thinking of it, worse luck. That doesn't count."

"Yes, but you're thinking of the people who are going to the war."

"So is every woman in Sakaeland, Harilek. That doesn't count either." She was graver now.

"But you see your thoughts are connected with their helmets."

"What do you mean?" She looked at me questioningly.

"Why, as to whether some one will ride with a nice favour of — say — a piece of mauve ribbon."

I looked at her, but she was gazing across the table again.

"Continue — charlatan," she said softly as I stopped.

"And wondering whether he will ask for the ribbon, or whether, since all fairy princes are perfect fools, it will be necessary to give it to him."

"My new riding-dress is russet, Harilek. I should like fawn gloves with it, and you shall take me out to-morrow and we will see whether such can be found."

"But why? You haven't explained your judgment so that I can see if it's right. You haven't said I'm wrong."

"Because I *never* thought he — whoever 'he' may be — would ask for a piece of ribbon. And as for *giving* such a favour — if 'he' wanted it, he would have to *take* it." She turned to me. "You're not such a success at the magic trade, Harilek. You'd better try something else."

"I shall."

"And what will you try?"

"What the soldiers of my country call 'offensive action,' a recipe which is very useful for thought-reading."

"You're pleased to be mysterious now."

However, before I could answer we saw that people were getting up, so we followed into the hall, and I saw little of her after that, as Andros and Forsyth annexed her to sing with Ziné, and I got no more chance of thought-reading that evening.

But Forsyth successfully spoilt my sleep by wondering whether Aryenis was going to marry Andros.

"I'm sure they're going to get off soon," said he, sitting on his bed contemplating the picture of Ziné which he had annexed out of Wrexham's kit. "They're always much too busy to worry about Ziné and me when we go out together."

"Don't suppose *you've* got any grouse on the point, anyway," said I brutally. "You get the more time to analyze who exactly Ziné reminds you of."

"She doesn't remind me of any one," he retorted. "Ziné is in a class all her own. I've never met any one like her before."

"Bad as that, is it, old thing?" I replied, unfeelingly. "You want to get back to civilization. Too much trekking has upset you."

"D—— civilization! Think of Ziné among a crowd of chattering idiots such as one meets at home!"

"You used to chatter with them all right upon occasion, so you shouldn't heave bricks."

"Must talk to some one. But when one's met the real article — things are different," he answered, rather lamely.

"I suppose they are," I said as I pulled up my blankets and made pretence of going to sleep. But it was poor pretence, and I was glad when Wrexham, who was immersed in the precious book of engineering formula that he had brought with him, put out the light and I could lie in the dark, open-eyed, without fear of people talking to me. D—— Andros!

Still, anyway, I should go riding with Aryenis the next day, and then soon we should be off to Aornos, and after that the war, when doubtless one might be too busy to waste time thinking. And after that the camels and home, even if all the rest went mad and wanted to stop in Sakaeland. I should still have Sadiq.

So next morning after the early breakfast, Aryenis and I rode out into the town to visit the shops where they sold the silk work of the upper valley. I had the pleasure of paying out some of Kyrlos's new silver coinage — which we had got from his treasury in exchange for our Chinese silver — for a pair of silk-embroidered leather gauntlets such as the upper-class Sakae women wear when riding.

"I hope you will try and read my thoughts often, Harilek," remarked Aryenis, regarding her new gloves as we rode along. "I love winning things."

"I'll make the same bet again if you like."

"Certainly. I could do with several more pairs of gloves. Will you begin?"

"No, not yet. I shall wait till the thoughts require elucidating."

"But why not now?"

"Because they're not worthy of my skill at present, since you can read them yourself at the moment."

"You're very clever this morning, Sir Thought-Reader."

"I was listening to you singing last night."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"It was clear that you had resolved some tangled thoughts a bit more than at dinner-time. You are easier to read when you sing, even though I don't know Sakae. Andros plays well, and you were in tune with him."

"Yes; he *was* rather good last night."

We had come out into the open space beyond the walls, where some of Milos's levies were collecting. There were rows and rows of felt tents and lines of brushwood shelters, while beyond these a party of men were practising with their bows against wicker targets under the direction of some N.C.O.'s. The Sakae are fine bowmen; and, although much of the rest of the levies' armament was crude, I fancied they would be able to give a good enough account of themselves when they got an opportunity of using their own pet weapon.

We pulled up our horses and watched them awhile, very statuesque figures, with their great bows pulled taut waiting the word to loose. Then the snapped order from the N.C.O. and the bowstrings sang home as the long yellow arrows changed to flickers of yellow light in the sunshine ere they stood quivering half buried in the wood backing of the targets.

At fifty yards one would want stout mail to stand up to the shock of the steel-shod war arrows loosed from a six-foot treble-sprung bow with a big man behind it.

"Does every man in Sakaeland use a bow?" I asked.

"Yes, every one, and some of the women, too."

"Do you?" The idea of Aryenis's slim arms pulling an arrow to the point seemed incongruous.

"Yes. A light one, of course. But with that I can beat Stephnos at fifty paces, and he's good — though not as good as Andros."

"I should like to see you do it."

"You shall one day — that is, if you don't want to go back to your own country directly the war's over."

"Why do you think I want to go back quickly?"

"Well, your sister's waiting, isn't she? — and then you will get tired not having all the wonderful things you've told me about. Carriages that go without horses, and things that fly, and glass that you can see through."

"Toys, in fact; not things that matter, as you put it."

"Yes; certainly toys — compared to some things. But men always want toys, don't they? That's the worst of them. They never can be content with the things that really make up life. They're all just the same: you and Stephnos, Wrexham and father; even Andros wants playthings instead of seeking what would turn life into something much bigger and finer than mere toys can ever do."

"What? Even Andros?" said I as we rode back. "Now I should have thought that he was the proper understanding kind of person who would be clever enough to realize the things that do matter. I'm sure that he always reads thoughts properly, and doesn't lose bets by guessing wrong."

"You're not much better at reading characters than you are at reading thoughts, Harilek. If you want to know, Andros is just as bad as you are at thought-reading. In fact — impossible as it may seem — he's even worse. He's been wrong twice in the last fortnight."

"I thought so; so I wasn't quite beside the mark yesterday."

"You thought that he was wrong, did you?" She looked a little puzzled, then suddenly smiled. "Oh, Harilek, I'd really like to shake you. You're *so* slow-witted sometimes. See if you can ride faster than you can think."

Whereat she put her horse into a canter that was practically a gallop, leaving me to follow her through the dust, and not till we reached the big gate did she condescend to let me catch her up and ride reasonably by her side. I was still pondering the reasons for her last remark, and doubtless, seeing

me silent, she felt she must shake my wits up for fear I might strain them thinking.

"Is Forsyth always anxious to have some one to squire — some one nice like Ziné, I mean?"

"Always, as far as I know. Each one reminds him of one of the ones before."

"Does Ziné remind him of any one in particular?" said she, looking at me sideways.

"No, I'm afraid not. That's the trouble, to my mind. He can only see Ziné now as Ziné, and not as, so to speak, 'essence of girl' in the abstract."

"Fancy talking of Ziné as something abstract! Harilek, I'm ashamed of you for even thinking such a thing."

"I didn't. I only said Forsyth ought to."

"And why ought he to?"

"Because he's like the rest of us — mere wanderers — here to-day and gone to-morrow."

"Perhaps you won't go. Perhaps your camels will die or something, and you'll have to spend your lives here without any nice looking-glasses or that funny stuff that you smoke, and have to wear Sakae clothes for the rest of your lives."

"Then I should jolly well walk across the desert."

"That's not polite, since I live here. You ought to say you would be very glad if something kept you here."

"I shouldn't be glad if something kept me here. Things don't make up life: people do. Possibly if some one kept me here it might be different."

Aryenis's pony shied at nothing as far as I could see, and it took her a minute or two to get him under control again, by which time she seemed to have lost the thread, and got back to the question of the doctor.

"I think that Forsyth would not mind much if the camels died, anyway. He wouldn't suggest walking across the desert."

"No; I suppose he wouldn't. But what makes you say that?"

"Because I've got two good eyes and two good ears and a brain behind them."

"You have, Aryenis: remarkably nice ears and particularly nice eyes."

"That's the first compliment I've had from you for over a week. What's happening?"

"Nothing. Only I've not seen so much of them of late. I suppose they strike one the more in consequence."

"Like your compliments."

"Do you like compliments?"

"What woman doesn't? Of course, I like compliments. That's why I love going to see Paulos."

"Does he give you lots of them?"

"No; but his old archer servant does."

I felt properly crushed at being referred to in the same breath with the chipped, old, weathered block of wood that had helped me so doubtfully with my new gear. I shifted the ground of debate.

"And what have your eyes and ears told you that makes you think the doctor wouldn't worry if the camels died?"

"That he thinks Ziné matters much more than camels."

"And does Ziné think that he matters?"

"She may. But then Ziné often considers that men are worth thinking about, which is very stupid, as I am always telling her."

"Then you don't consider that they are worth worrying over?"

"Not in the least. They're useful sometimes when you want things done for you — that's all. But as for wasting time and energy worrying about them as Ziné does, Heavens, no!"

"Or tangling your thoughts over them?"

That shaft went home, I could see. I was sorry for Aryenis's pony, for the Sakae snaffles are rather jagged, and their stirrups, which they use as spurs, over-sharp. The simultaneous application of both stirrup and bit must be uncomfortable to a spirited mount.

So I didn't take much count of Aryenis's over-emphasized statement, made with her chin well in the air:

"As if I would ever tangle my thoughts over things like that!"

"Perhaps you don't tangle them. Perhaps the fairy prince without the marks tangles them for you."

"Well, you've got a big enough mark across your cheek to prevent you ever playing that part," she retorted, looking ruthlessly at my face, which, as Forsyth said it would be, was embellished with a very angry-looking gash.

"Still, as you said, it serves to remind me of what I saw in the gate," I said, equally ruthlessly as I looked back at her.

My lady seemed to have no answer to that, and we rode into the palace gate in silence.

CHAPTER XXI

I AM GIVEN A FOLLOWING

THE road to Aornos was bright in the November sunshine, and the light breeze rustled the falling leaves which dropped, russet-brown, from the trees bordering the road above the water-channels: glinting, rippling, sun-flecked water, splashed with patches of vivid turquoise from the white-flecked blue sky overhead.

We were riding into Aornos to meet the rest of Kyrlos's troops, concentrated there to march into the Shaman country. There were daily reports from the frontier of enemy concentrations, the majority of them to the south in the country beyond Henga's fort; but so far there had been no sign of any general offensive movement, and it was considered that the frontier troops, strengthened by the levies of the border districts, would be quite sufficient to stop any advance the enemy might try to make.

The scene was mediæval in the extreme, and yet had that sameness which must have characterized all bodies of troops since the first leader conceived some idea of discipline, and man began to fight in formed groups rather than in primeval fashion, individual against individual, with rough-chipped flint and sharpened bone.

Ahead of the column moved a body of mail-clad mounted men, their long yellow bows swaying as they rode. Mounted fighting is uncommon among the Sakae, whose horses are but a means of extra mobility. Mounted or on foot, the equipment is ever the same, all designed for dismounted combat: the long bow, carried slung from the shoulder, the point supported in a stirrup bucket for mounted men; the well-filled leather quivers with the long gay-coloured shafts; the short straight Sakae sword designed for point-work, more deadly than any cut; and sometimes the small round

shield with its bosses of brass. One man in three carried the short spear.

At the head of the main body was Kyrlos, with Andros on one hand and Wrexham on the other, all alike in mail shirt and under-jerkin of leather, steel caps winking in the sun, the gay-coloured saddles forming the only splash of colour that relieved the sombre background of fawn and leather and dull steel, save where a few paces in front of Kyrlos rose his blue standard with his family device, the big chenar leaf in autumn tint that Forsyth always said made him homesick for the maple of Canada. Behind them the long column of men three abreast: first mounted men, and then, as far as the eye could reach, company after company of footmen, with glint of steel spear-point and nodding bow-tip topping the low dust haze.

I was riding in silence, with mixed feelings of relief at being on the move once more with definite work in front, a great longing for the open desert and the silent plodding camels, and a very bitter impression that Fate had played the most deliberate of scurvy tricks in ever bringing me to Sakaeland.

For as Andros turned sometimes in his saddle to cast an eye down the ranks, I could see the little tuft of eagle feathers bound into his steel cap, the eagle feathers that marked the officer of high rank, and — which was the cause of all my ill-humour — note the mauve binding that spread them cunningly into a little fan. The day before I had seen Aryenis with a handful of eagle feathers, and later, looking out from my window, noticed her sitting in the sun with her embroidery-basket by her — she has clever fingers. My field-glasses were near me, and such an opportunity of watching my lady unobserved was not to be missed. I love watching Aryenis when she thinks there is no one looking at her, for her under-self seems to come so much more to the surface then. But unfortunately my glasses had merely served to show me that those eagle feathers were being formed with mauve ribbon and green silk into some kind of ornament;

and then in the morning, lo, Andros with the little fanlike plume gay against the dark coldness of his steel cap.

And all I got from Aryenis was a long cool hand-clasp with a kind wish for my safety and much honour. Annais and Ziné gave me as much.

Just in front of me rode a yellow-haired giant on a white pony, who carried a green banner with an embroidered device, a bear, Paulos's own mark. As I looked back — despite my ill-humour — I could have smiled at the idea of me, Harry Lake, with many years of soldiering and six years of war, as the modern world knows it, behind me, war of machine-gun and rifle, of heavy howitzer and aeroplane bomb, of tank and armoured car, riding with a following that might have come straight out of the pages of an old history book. Steel-capped, mail-shirted men on rough ponies, tall, bobbed-haired, hawk-faced bowmen in leather jerkins, nodding spear-points and dancing gleam of mail-ringed caps; and behind me, with my trumpeter, Payindah in mail with his anachronistic magazine-rifle slung over his shoulder, his straight Greek features and his wheat-coloured face alive with the joy of coming battle.

For here was I riding at the head of what was for the moment my own following, and the banner ahead bore almost my own crest, save that the bear on my signet ring carries a chain.

And the reason of my position was a note which Paulos had sent me the day after I had listened to him thought-reading, bidding me come again and see him quickly, for he desired me to help him in a small matter. I told Aryenis, but my lady had found important matters which prevented her coming, despite her insistence the previous day.

The upshot of my visit was his wish that I should lead the men from his lands to the war, since he had no son to lead them and no man of sufficient standing among his following to whom he could entrust the command. I pleaded my ignorance of Sakae, my lack of knowledge of their customs and their methods of war, and the fact that I was a stranger in the country. He would take no refusal.

"Regarding the matter of the language," he had said, "the officers and some of the N.C.O.'s speak Greek. For the matter of our methods of war, there is to my mind but one kind of war — no matter what the weapons be. At the last it is the man who is ready to close and anxious to kill who wins. From a leader all we seek is bravery and the knowledge of men. The first you have, or Aryenis would not be here now. The second you have also, unless I have lost my gift of character-reading. And for the fact of your being a stranger — that you are not. Your name is known in all my villages. Such things do not depend upon time, but upon deeds; and my people — who love Aryenis — speak of you as one of ourselves. My folk will follow you for her sake as well as for your own."

The coincidence of the device on his banner and the friendly reception I had met with from his landholders, who officered the levies which he sent to the war, clinched the matter, and so you see me with thirty mail-clad mounted men and four companies of stout bowmen, each eighty or ninety strong, riding into Aornos near the head of Kyrlos's army.

I had spent very near a fortnight with Paulos, getting to know the officers and the levies and picking up details about their methods. They were stout fighting material — sturdy peasantry, ready at all costs to defend their homes and their women from the Shaman menace. I have gone to war with many worse, but never, I think, with any better, and I have led good men upon occasion.

Looking back, I called up Payindah.

"We be back in the days of the Emperors," said I, pointing to the men behind us. "Bows and arrows, men in mail, just the same as thy folk when first they came over the passes into the Punjab."

"And good days to be in, sahib. This is a man's war — man to man — not a killing by guns a day's march away, or fighting like rats in a hole underground. These men of the old sick chief's are good fighting stuff, too. *I* know such when I see them."

Payindah first, last, and all the time is a fighting man, and like all his folk of the Salt Range will be so as long as his finger can press trigger or his arm retain strength to drive a bayonet home. At his belt hung a new possession which he fondled now and then. It was a bayonet made under Wrexham's supervision by Kyrlos's smiths, rather more ornate than the ordinary G.S. pattern, but none the less a serviceable piece of steel. There are good armourers among the Sakae. Payindah is a believer in the cold steel, and the idea of going out to war without a bayonet — a weapon he had used notably well more than once in France — was heavy upon his soul, and he had gone to Wrexham begging him to have one made. His first appearance with it on his rifle had caused quite an excitement among his friends of Kyrlos's guard when he gave them a little demonstration of its use.

"You will be fortunate in this war," he went on, "since you ride with the banner of your own folk, just the same as over the gate of your house in England, which I saw when I was at the convalescent hospital at Brighton, and you took me to your home one day in a motor when you came on leave."

"Why shall I be fortunate?"

"Because the bear shows that you must be in some way the same folk as the old chief, and he has no son and much rich land. He will be glad to find a son in his old age. And also" — very deliberately — "a daughter-in-law like the Shahzadi."

I think Payindah only escaped a sudden violent death after that remark by his falling back to make place for Philos, my second in command, who came up to tell me about quartering arrangements in Aornos. A little way back he had fallen out at a side road, where his wife — a very pretty girl on a handsome black mare — was waiting to bid him good-bye. A mounted servant beside her carried, on his saddle bow, the bonniest blue-eyed flaxen-haired boy of about three that I have ever seen. As I had ridden on

after a word with the girl, whom I had met while staying with Paulos, I had felt very, very lonely. And yet I have gone to war two or three times before and never felt lonely at going.

A little later we rode through Aornos and out of the south gate to the open grass land beyond, now covered with the tents and standards of the Blue Sakae army. I saw my people fix up camp — Philos proved a first-class quartermaster as well as a very capable leader — and then, with Payindah and a couple of my archers behind me, rode up to Torka's house, where Kyrlos and his staff — including Wrexham and Forsyth — were lodging.

Next morning very early I rode down to my people's camp. Behind me were two mounted archers of my personal troop, loose-stirrured, their keen eyes seeking out the prettiest of the girls already afoot for the morning marketing. We had just reached our camp where the sentries stood on either side of Paulos's banner, which, furled in leather, stood before our guard tent, when from up the road in front in a cloud of dust came a single horseman.

I pulled up to see who was riding so fast and what tidings he bore, for the previous evening a messenger from Henga had reported increased signs of enemy activity, and a mounted patrol pushing across the border had been driven back by enemy horsemen only two miles from the fort, while a spy — believed trustworthy — had reported that the main enemy force were within easy march of the border. So I thought there would possibly be news. Philos, standing near the guard tent checking sheafs of arrows, bales of forage, and other gear, seeing me, came over.

My archers shouted, and the horseman pulled up as he reached us, his pony, with legs well out and hanging head, breathing heavily through wide-stretched nostrils. The morning was cold, with a nip of frost in the air, but the animal was lathered with sweat and his legs were caked with mud, while there was blood oozing from a long gash across his quarters. Philos questioned the man, who was pulling

out a folded paper from inside his jerkin. Then he turned to me.

"A letter from Henga. The enemy's main army marched before daybreak, and the dawn saw them close on his fort. This man and another were sent with news at once, and even as they left, the enemy were closing in on the fort. He says that their horsemen were well into our country, and that his comrade was killed as they broke through, while he himself had his horse wounded. A big force, and from the hills after he crossed the Astara he saw them sweeping on past the fort, with villages ablaze already. We had better get under arms, for Kyrlos will surely move at once. Shall I sound a call?"

"Yes, Philos. Turn the men out, and get everything ready for moving in an hour's time. I will take this letter to Kyrlos myself."

I had torn open the letter while he was questioning the man; but although in Greek characters it was evidently in Sakae, for I could make neither head nor tail of it.

"Give the messenger food and have his horse seen to. I will be back at once," I said as I gathered up my reins, and, with my archers behind me — now all suppressed excitement and with no eyes left for the scared girls who edged off the road as we came tearing along — went back full speed to the city.

As we clattered through the big gates one of my orderlies shouted something to the sentry, and looking back I saw the guard tumbling out of their quarters. A minute later a thin wisp of smoke went up from the guard-house above the gate, a wisp which before long thickened to a dense black pillar, signal to the countryside that the enemy were moving. We came up the main street at a hand gallop, the pedestrians scuttling to either side at the scurry of hoofs and the shouts of my men, swung to the left up to the keep, and pulled up before the main entrance. I flung my reins to one of the men, and ran up the steps to find Kyrlos talking to Torka and Andros in the main hall. As he read the letter, I hurriedly explained the situation to Andros.

"We must march at once," said Kyrlos. "But they have many hours' start of us, unfortunately. They can be eight or nine miles into our country before we can hope to meet them. Henga estimates them at not less than six thousand to seven thousand, and there will be more behind if this is their main force. How soon can we move, Andros?"

"I gave orders yesterday for the troops to be ready to move at three hours' notice, sir. Did you warn the camp, Harilek?" He turned to me.

"Yes; Philos sounded a horn as I came away, and the men were turning out. I told my people to be ready in an hour."

"Then we can be away within the three hours, sir. Milos's mounted troops under Stephnos must go first, and find out in which direction the enemy are heading, and then get news back to meet us along the main road. He may meet them anywhere after the sixth mile out."

By this time the alarm was sounding all round, and outside the courtyard was filling with horses as mounted man after mounted man came clattering in seeking orders from Andros. I have never seen such good methodical staff work outside a modern force. I could almost forgive Andros his plume of mauve-bound eagle feathers as I listened to his quick, incisive orders given in a cool, level tone, and watched messenger after messenger race down the steps, swing into the saddle, and away out of the gates. The man was not only a born soldier — he was that far rarer being, a born staff officer.

I went up to our quarters, and calling Payindah told him to come with me, leaving my kit to follow with a couple of my men. Wrexham and Forsyth were nowhere to be seen. The latter had gone off with Stephnos, who had a job in which his heart delighted — to wit, the command of Milos's own mounted troops. Firoz said that Wrexham had ridden off early with one of Kyrlos's officers who ran the engineers. John took a keen interest in their weird contraptions, portable catapults, and endless mediæval contrivances for siege-work, more particularly in the quaint battering-ram, a huge

iron-shod tree — the trunk of a full-grown pine, I think, it was — that took twenty men to swing it. Despite his early training and his civil avocation, Wrexham is at heart a soldier, and nothing pleased him more than pottering round and comparing notes with the old scarred man who filled the post of what one might call "Master of the Ordnance" to Kyrlos's army.

When I got back to the hall, Payindah with the rifles following, Andros hailed me.

"You say you told your people to be ready to move in an hour, Harilek?"

"I did, Andros. Do you want us to go ahead?"

"You muster nearly four hundred, do you not?" He was a wonder at remembering figures.

"Yes."

"Well, that's too weak to do much by yourselves, but, if you get off in an hour, Stephnos will be through you half an hour later — say, two miles out — and then following him you will be something for him to come back on if he's driven in. Do you know that little hill by the eighth mile that commands the road? — the one we looked at yesterday."

"Yes," said I. We had ridden out there the previous day, and remarked on its possibilities for defence.

"Well, make for that as fast as you can go. If you can get there before the enemy, you will be able to hold them awhile — perhaps until we can get up to you. In any case you will delay them. I know all Paulos's men are good bowmen, for he is always making his people practise. We come as fast as we can."

"Right. I shall be away in little over half an hour."

Kyrlos was listening to it all, nodding gravely from time to time. As I turned to go, he called to me, and walked across the hall to the door.

"Andros has given you a post of honour, my friend. You will meet the Shamans' main onslaught, and you will have to fight as hard as you have ever fought in your life, I think.

But it is the only place they can pass just there, and if you hold them till we come, it will be so many the more of our villages and our people saved. It seems unfair to put a guest in the post of danger, but, since you ride at the head of Paulos's men and by so doing become one of us, I am glad that Andros has suggested you for such a very honourable task. If you come through, you will have even more honour among our people than you have already. God guard you, Harilek."

He smiled very gravely at me as I touched my cap to him and went down the steps.

Payindah was already mounted alongside of my other two men, and a quarter of an hour later we were riding hard up to our camp. Paulos had had his men well trained for all that they were mostly only levies. The mounted troop were standing by their horses, and the infantry falling in as we reached them. A small party had been detailed to clear up camp and come on with our pack-animals behind the main body.

I explained our mission to Philos and the other officers, and they said a few words to the men. Fifteen minutes later, with our mounted men ahead and on either flank, we marched down the road to the southwest.

"Where go we?" asked Payindah, pushing his horse up beside me. "Is it another raid?"

"Not this time. The whole enemy's army comes — several thousand — and we go out as advance guard to hold them until the rest can come up. You will have all the fighting you want before the day is out."

"They choose well," said he coolly, "to send you and me and this regiment, which carries your mark. I shall have something to tell Firoz to-night."

I wondered for a moment if he would tell Firoz anything at all that night or any other night. Unless we got to the defile in time, the enemy's mounted men would be round us long before our main body could ever hope to get up, and then sheer weight of numbers would do the rest. Anyway,

Paulos's banner would get all the honour he desired for it, and I should not have to worry any more about Aryenis and fairy princes or dragons. But I hoped that she and I would meet again some day, whatever happened — somewhere where people's thoughts didn't get tangled up and things ran smoothly. And then, as ever, she walked in, and took possession of the mind that used to be mine, and it was a moment or two before I could dislodge her and return to military commonplaces with Philos.

CHAPTER XXII

THE ASTARA DEFILE

THE dusty white road slipped away behind us, four steady miles to the hour. Somewhere about the third mile I heard shouting behind me, and my men swung to one side as Stephnos came up and passed us with some one hundred and fifty mounted men. He checked to speak to me a moment, and I saw Forsyth riding with him.

"Well, Harry, we've struck it this time. You've got a nice-looking crowd there, and Stephnos tells me you'll want them all soon."

"What are you doing along with Stephnos? You ought to be waiting to patch up the wounded behind."

"Think I'm going to sit behind while you and John have all the fun, and be the only one of us three that hasn't seen a battle-fight in Sakaeland? Not much. You two have had all the luck so far, but it's my shift to-day. I'm going to forget I'm a doctor, and go and see the beano close in for once instead of sitting down to be shelled without being able to hit back. However, this is a gentlemanly country, and they have no guns."

"Where's John?" I asked, as Stephnos's troops shook out into reconnoitring formation.

"Way behind with Kyrlos. Wanted to come up and join you, but Kyrlos said he wasn't going to have all his three guests out of his sight at once, so John is more or less tied to the old man's saddle, cursing like a trooper because they're so slow getting under way. Well, there goes Stephnos; I'm off. See you later, Harry."

And the next moment he was cantering up the road after the tail of Stephnos's column.

We were in sight of the hills and the defile that I wanted to reach before we came on the first sign of the enemy, who had

evidently not been so fast as we expected. We marched through a little hamlet, and in the middle of it were some dead men — Brown Sakae, Philos said — and two wounded horsemen of Stephnos's troop sitting on the roadside talking to the villagers. Both sides had reached the place simultaneously, and the scuffle which followed had ended in the enemy bolting back.

We reached the defile, and I breathed a sigh of relief at this unexpected good fortune. Halting my column, I rode up with Philos to the top of the hill on the right, and there in front of me was the enemy force — not an inspiring sight in view of our numbers. They were about two miles away, long low dust columns, and behind them the smoke of burning ricks and thatch. Closer to us were parties of mounted men, and perhaps a mile ahead in three parties Stephnos's little force. Looking through my glasses, I saw one of his troops chasing back an enemy party. As Wrexham had said, Master Stephnos was a thruster all right.

We had won by a short neck, and the next thing was to get into position as quickly as possible.

Just at this point the Astara, quite unfordable, closes in on to the road from the left as you look toward the Shaman country. At the point where we were it was not more than three hundred yards from the road, and behind us it swerved out in a wide curve southeastward. About half a mile in front it was joined by a sluggish stream running in a marshy depression, which curved round our right flank toward the hills. Between the marshy stream and the main road was the hillock we were standing on, perhaps two hundred yards long and one hundred and fifty feet high, while on the opposite side, between the road and the river, was a lower, smaller hill.

It was an ideal position for a small force to delay an enemy, since our left flank was absolutely secure, so long as we held the lesser height, while the approach across the stream and marshland on our right was anything but easy. All around the bigger hill, about halfway up, ran a thick

thorn hedge enclosing an orchard. The smaller hill had on the forward slope two or three mud buildings and a small stone wall, which would give some cover to the defenders.

"We stand here," I said to Philos. "One company on the small hill, two companies on this one, with our right extending down toward the marsh. The fourth company and the mounted men will be behind us as the reserve under you. I shall be up here. It will be a fight in which we must make the most of our shooting and try to prevent them closing, since once they close their extra numbers will tell."

The company commanders had followed us up, and I explained what I wanted. The small hill I gave to a young cousin of Philos, who seemed a steady, determined youth. The mounted archers had been drawn in, so I sent for two of the Greek-speaking N.C.O.'s, and kept them by me as messengers and interpreters.

Within ten minutes the men were in their places, and I did a hurried walk round. They were all very quiet and resolute-looking: big bows strung and quivers forward, while many of them had arrows stuck upright in the ground in front of them or laid on top of the wall. I said a few words to the officers, emphasizing the importance of holding on and making the most of our position and our bows.

"Never fear," said Philos's cousin. "We hold here as long as there is a man to draw bow. Our homes are but a few miles behind, and our women, and we and they know the Shamans. They will pass this only over our bodies."

I climbed back to my post on the higher hill, and told off Payindah to mark the little bridge some eight hundred yards away, where the road crossed the smaller stream. Some rapid fire on that would check the enemy's first efforts to cross, and time was everything. I intended to lend him a hand myself in the opening moves.

Our preparations were only just completed when we saw Stephnos's mounted men coming back, pursued by considerably greater numbers. I thought at first they would come straight back on to us, but instead of that they swung out

to our right on the farther side of the stream, and the fight followed them beyond the marshes. There was a narrow strip of firm ground there about a mile from us, and when Stephnos had got the leading enemy bogged, his men took to their bows and dealt with them. For his age the lad was a cool-headed leader.

Then the enemy advanced on us — a body of mounted men in front — and as the first of them reached the bridge Payindah and I opened fire. The range was longish, but we knocked over several as they checked in a mass at the crossing. Our men cheered and shouted at seeing the foe struck down at such an undreamt-of range, and the enemy were evidently disconcerted. But at that distance with only two rifles the effect was but momentary, and before long they were streaming over the bridge and moving up toward us. I told Payindah to spend his time picking off any one that looked like a leader, and then I stood up as the first formed mass of the enemy approached. We let them come to well within the hundred yards before our bowmen let drive, and the first attack just melted away in swathes of stricken men, very few getting within twenty yards, while such as reached us — all men with good mail — were dealt with, while they tried to call on their fellows or tore at the hedge in their efforts to get through. They had not supported their attack with arrows, and as a result we had hardly any casualties at all.

As the survivors drew off discomfited, parties of my men rushed out to gather up arrows, and I fear upon occasion to finish off some of the wounded. We had a little difficulty in getting them back again, and I went round again to impress once more on the officers the importance of not letting their men get out of hand.

Then the enemy came on again, and this time, profiting by experience, supported their attack with showers of arrows from bowmen on the flanks, and we began to lose men, though the shooting was not too good, and our people had fair cover. We beat them back a second time, but there

were many gaps in our ranks now, and the orchard was sprinkled with dead and wounded men; while in one place a wild Shaman rush secured a momentary lodgment inside our defences, and was only killed out by a quick rush of the reserve. While we were filling up our ranks and getting ready for their next onslaught, I blessed Philos's forethought that had brought along the spare sheaves of arrows. We should want them all soon.

So far the enemy's main attention had been directed to us, though there was some brisk work on the lower hill. But the next time they left us alone, massing heavily against the little hill, sweeping up in wave after wave of shouting men. They carried the wall and pushed on to the building, and for some minutes there was close hand-to-hand fighting. Then the enemy swayed back again as the company reserve rushed in, and they were slowly pushed backward down the hill, till the last of them turned and fled down to the bottom again.

I seized the moment's respite to run across and see how things were. Over half that company were out of action, and Philos's cousin, bleeding from a knife gash in the left arm, was closing his men back to a smaller circle around the huts, some of which he had hurriedly loopholed for his bowmen.

"They pressed us hard that time," he panted, as he tied up the cut on his arm. "I thought they would drive us down. I doubt our standing another charge like that. See, many of my men are dead, and more are badly hurt."

"You must hold on somehow. I will send you thirty men from Philos's company, which is all I can spare."

As I returned to my position I could see the enemy massing anew in still greater strength, as the main body pressed up the road toward the bridge. I told Philos to send thirty of his men over to his cousin, and they got there just as the enemy advanced once more.

This time they attacked us both, broke through into our orchard, and once again swept right over the defences of the lower hill. We took heavy toll of them as they came up the

steep slope, but they did not lack courage, and the gaps in the lines filled as fast as they were made, while their arrows slowly but steadily wore down our weak force. Twice we drove them back out of the orchard, and twice they pushed their way in again. The third time they drove us back to the very crest, and only the reserve under Philos saved us being cleared right off the hilltop. The green hillside was strewn with bodies, and every now and then a wild rush of shouting men would surge in, with scurry of steel, and the low dull sound of blows, shouts of slayers, and cry of wounded, though for the most part the Blue Sakae fought in silence, fighting like trapped wolves.

We beat them out once more, and Payindah's rifle was hot and the woodwork oily, and his beloved bayonet red to the haft. As they drew off I looked around. On the lower hill the fight raged round the huts, and the whole hill was massed with the enemy. On our side we had no longer men to hold the orchard hedge, and had to draw back to positions nearer the crest. To the right the enemy had found ways through the marshland, and driven up our men below, while my thirty mounted men had come up the hill, picketed their ponies behind, and were standing just under the crest waiting for orders.

Still farther out to the right, Stephnos was heavily outnumbered, and I could see him withdrawing toward us, disputing every inch of cover where his men dismounted and fought awhile with the bow, galloping off once more as the enemy closed, to dismount again and renew the fight at the next point that offered cover.

"It is finished," said Philos, pointing to the lower hill. "See, the enemy have swept right over it."

"Yes, but the huts still hold," said I, looking through my glasses. "I can see the enemy still being shot down with arrows. Your cousin has drawn the rest of his men into the buildings and still holds out. But the road is open behind us now, and we shall be surrounded in a little while. Send a reliable man to tell Stephnos how we stand. If he is go-

ing to join us, he must do so now. Otherwise it will be too late."

"They come!" shouted Payindah, pointing back down the Aornos road.

The men around did not understand him, but they caught his meaning, as looking back we saw, about two miles away, the low long dust-cloud that shows marching troops, and a low cheer went up.

"Half an hour more, Philos," said I. "We shall be hard put to it to hold that time."

"And my messenger is killed. See, the enemy is thick between us and Stephnos. He will have to draw off to the rearward. We fight this out alone. The enemy on the lower hill have seen the dust. Hark, how they shout and call to those behind. They will attack us now with all their strength to get the hills ere Kyrlos comes, so that the rest of their people may cross the river. Lo, they come now!"

His orders rang out, and our worn lines stiffened again as the enemy advanced up the hill once more, dense masses of closely packed men, and their arrows rained on us anew. My second orderly, standing behind me, gave a choked sob as an arrow tore into his throat, and he reeled backward, the light breaking in his eyes.

But Paulos's men held steady, and there was neither shouting nor cheering, only the harsh cries of the N.C.O.'s bidding them shoot steady and all together. For a space we held the attackers off, but ever the pressure increased as they drove upon us again and again, till finally they forced us from our last cover out on to the open hilltop, where my little reserve of mounted men were already busy loosing arrows against the enemy now massing behind us.

We flung back our flanks to complete a circle, and then they swarmed upon us from all sides, and we fought in a close-packed ring as with a last endeavour they sought to dislodge us before our main army, now clear to view, gleam of spear-point and glint of mail in the dust, could reach the hills.

They broke into our ring, and we beat them out once, fighting hard in silence. There was no more chance for the long bows, and men fought with sword or knife or heavy axe, and here and there, in stark primeval fashion, with tooth and clutching hand. Then a last rush broke into our centre, and the fight swayed and split as my little troop was carried right over the hilltop in a stabbing, spitting rush of savage men in Shaman mail, and Brown Sakae wadded felt or sheepskin. My standard-bearer, most of my mounted men, Payindah, Philos, and a handful of his own company — we checked them once again, and found our feet; and, looking backward, I saw our leading troops very near, and below us enemy pouring past to try and check their onslaught while those above finished us. In they came again, while beyond us — close-packed — some forty of my men fought in a little ring of trees, while Shamans and Brown Sakae surged about them like a pack around a bayed boar.

Philos — just in front of me — sent his sword home in the throat of a mail-clad Shaman, and as he did so was beaten down by an axe-blow over the head. My last pistol bullet settled the axeman as I sprang in over Philos, Paulos's blade in my hand. I thanked my stars then for my early-fostered taste for swordsmanship, for there was no time to reload.

A long-haired, long-moustached man, with a face like a bird of prey, leapt in at me with others on either hand, while behind them more dim figures surged up. His long knife came sweeping up from below, but I caught it in time with the low parry my old *maître d'armes* used to rub into me when I was a lad in France, and the instinctive riposte drove in below the man's belt, and he swayed over sideways, nearly wrenching my sword from my hand. A spear rang home on my chest, knocking me sideways as I freed my blade, and then I realized Payindah's presence as his rifle spoke almost in my ear, and the owner of the spear went down in a huddled mass.

The enemy checked a second then, and I saw that Philos

moved and tried to raise himself, and the absence of any heavy flow of blood about his head made me think he was only stunned. Then in they surged anew, and for a breathless instant I fought for my life with a mail-shirted, clean-shaven Shaman, with an expressionless face and the mouth of a fiend, and eyes that seemed made of yellow jade. Once he nearly got home with a thrust that I parried only just in time, and the riposte was too slow, for he jumped out and in again like a wild-cat. But, as he came on the second time, I caught him in the throat with the long, straight-armed *coup d'arrêt*, and my point stood out a clear three inches behind his neck muscles as his expressionless eyes rolled upward, and he sank a dead weight on my sword. Then a tearing hot pain in my right thigh brought me to the ground as my leg was swept from under me by a spear with a greasy sheep-skin-coated ruffian at the other end.

My jade-eyed man and I came down in a heap over Philos, who was trying to get to his feet again, and there was another sickening wrench as the greasy man dragged his spear-point clear for a final thrust. Luckily in Sakaeland they favour the thin, small, leaf-shaped spear with razor edges.

He shortened spear as I struggled on the ground, and then Payindah leapt across me — a shadow against the blue sky and the ring of men around — and his bayonet went home under the man's ribs. Hardly was it in when he pulled it free again to drive the rifle-butt with all his force into the jaw of a knifeman who sprang upon him. The man reeled backward — his jawbone smashed — and then with a rush and a whirl the first wave of our people from behind swept over us in a storm of steel; and a mixed mob of Shaman, Brown Sakae, and our own Blue Sakae troops went swirling on down the hill, and the little hilltop was silent a moment ere a new rush of our people pressed over it.

Philos had got to his feet and stood unsteadily, looking round over the stricken remnants of our companies. Then a new throng of Kyrlos's folk passed over us, Andros sword in

hand, his eagle plumes gay in his steel cap ahead of them. Seeing us, he waved on his men and stopped.

"Sore hurt, Harilek?" he queried, as I lay on the ground, while Payindah and my standard-bearer tied up my leg, which was bleeding freely.

"I think not gravely, but enough to keep me quiet a bit," said I, feeling, indeed, very limp.

"You have suffered here, I see. But Paulos's banner will be sung of in all Sakaeland, and with it will be remembered your name so long as the story is told. Harilek, I envy you your fortune. We hold them, and in another half-hour we will drive them over the river, and presently across the border. They fall back already. And 'tis you we have to thank."

He considered me thoughtfully. "You ought to have been born among us Sakae, Harilek. Such a fight has not been fought since the old, old days. First you save Aryenis, and now you fight to a finish in a battle to help a people whom you hardly know, sword to sword in our own fashion, too, it seems, and not with your noise weapons. You are to be envied, I think."

"And to be thanked also, Harilek," said Philos. "I am dazed still, but it seems that I owe you my life. We are all your debtors."

"The fight had nothing much to do with me, Andros. It was fought by Paulos's folk. I am to be envied in that I had the fortune to be with such men, that only. And as for your matter, Philos, in such a close fight every man owes something to every one else. I in turn owe my life to my man here. But how many of our people are left?"

"I go and see now. Not over-many, I fear. I think my cousin is dead also, and he was to have been married next month." He went off, still walking rather shakily. Luckily the axe had glanced from his cap, and, barring a very sore and aching head, he was none the worse next day.

"I must go on, Harilek, since you are all right," said Andros. "I see your friends coming up, so you will be looked

after. I am sorry you will not see the enemy really punished, for I fear you will lie abed some time. Nevertheless, although you are laid by the heels, I envy you."

He smiled a farewell, and went off after his troops.

Then came Forsyth and Wrexham, the former somewhat battle-worn, but cheerful, as befits a man who has dealt properly with a superior force of enemy all day and seen their backs at last.

"Heard you'd copped it, Harry," said Forsyth as he knelt down to examine my leg. "Luckily I brought along a haversack of dressings and things on my pony. What is it? Arrow? Sword?" He pulled off Payindah's crude bandage as he spoke.

"Spear, worse luck. It seems to have made a largish hole, doesn't it?"

"Might be worse, and it's clean-looking. No arteries touched, which is the chief thing. I'll get a first dressing on, and then we'll get you back to Aornos. Feeling limp?"

"Not too bad. Should like a meal more than anything."

Wrexham, having discovered that I was not seriously hurt, had hurried on again to catch Kyrlos and join in the fight.

Some of my men had come up now with a rough stretcher, and when Forsyth had tied me up they carried me down the hill to the road, where such of our men as were left were collecting. We were a sorry sight when we finally took count. There were about sixty sound men; another sixty or so who, though wounded, could stand; seventy or so badly wounded, some of whom were not likely to see the day out. The rest were dead. Paulos's contingent would take no further part in the war for some time. I was more than glad to see Philos's cousin among the last to come in. He had collected the débris of his company in the huts at the last, and held out there with a score of men. After one or two efforts the enemy had left them, doubtless intending to smoke them out or burn them out at their leisure. He had been wounded again after I had first seen him, and his mail was hacked and scarred, and his

leather under-jerkin stained with blood and ripped in places, but he was still in fighting form.

He wrung me by the hand as he came up.

"A good fight, Sir Harilek. We shall have much honour in the land. And there are very much fewer Shamans now than this morning. Over two hundred we slew on our hill, and you must have killed twice that number on your side. But we have suffered sorely. There will be many desolate homes round Aornos to-night."

The bulk of Kyrlos's army had passed us, and the fight had swayed back over the stream. The enemy were in full retreat, it seemed. Kyrlos had missed us, having gone straight on down the road, whereas Andros had come up over the hill, but he sent me a little note later in the afternoon, which I keep as a memory of that day on the Astara. The Sakae are a most straight-spoken people, either when pleased or displeased.

Our pack-animals came up presently, and we had some food, which was very welcome. Andros had given Philos orders that we were to go back to Aornos for the present, taking our wounded and leaving a guard over our dead, who would be fetched next morning for burial by their folk. The Sakae set great store on burying their dead in their own villages, whenever possible, rather than in a strange place. Rough stretchers were improvised for such of the wounded as could not walk, and with the assistance of the sound men some of us were carried and others packed into bullock-carts, which Andros had brought for us. It was dark before we reached our camp at Aornos, and I was glad to get to bed in the warm firelit room in Torka's house, and, after more dressing by Forsyth, to eat a meal specially prepared for me, and brought up by Torka's wife in person, a talkative but kindly lady, who fussed over me a lot. But the only person I wanted to fuss over me just then was the only one I couldn't have, and I was glad when Forsyth produced some hot milk and aspirin, with an order to go to sleep if I could.

I got to sleep eventually, despite my leg, but the silence

was broken now and then by women wailing over their dead, for some of the Aornos men had been the van of Kyrlos's troops. The day had been distinctly hectic, which did not aid sleep. And, lastly, Aryenis came into my mind, and refused to go away at all, despite the insistent memory of Andros's mauve-bound eagle feathers. It was a bad night altogether, and I was glad when, in the morning after he had dressed my leg again, Forsyth announced that Paulos had sent in demanding immediate delivery of my person at his house, since I was the leader of his men, and therefore his house was mine for as long as I wanted it.

"Would you rather stop here or go on? It's only four miles, and he's sent his own special litter for you."

"I'll go. I don't want to stop here and be a nuisance to these people, whom I hardly know. They'll have others along presently, and I feel at home with Paulos."

So I went in Paulos's litter, with the remnants of my companies behind me, and the yellow-haired standard-bearer, in his battle-stained mail, riding ahead with Paulos's banner. The people cheered us through the streets, and I was glad, for Paulos's men had more than earned it.

CHAPTER XXIII

I PRETEND TO UNDERSTAND ARYENIS

THE winter sun shone gaily in through the open windows of my bedroom at Paulos's, dimming the red flames of the big log fire, and throwing bright shafts of light along the dark polished floor. Outside, under the cloudless blue sky, the chenar trees stood in the last warmth of their russet autumn dress, almost the colour of Aryenis's hair. The leafless silver of the poplars, the falling yellow leaves of the big mulberries, the faint yellow tinge in the green of the little lawns, the occasional splash of colour of a late rose with its loose-leaved glory of crimson, all spoke to the end of the year, and the little posy of winter violets on the table by my bed were a last parting gift of fragrance from a year that had held more life and adventure than all the thirty-one preceding it. Also a year that had once seemed to hold more promise than I had ever dreamed of.

This was my second day at Paulos's, and the peace of the place was sinking into my soul after the rather tiring and strained days I had been through. I had been put into the big oak-panelled bedroom on the ground-floor with a verandah which gave on to the walled garden at the back, Paulos's favourite resort. My leg was less painful already, and, according to Forsyth, gave promise of healing up straight away — partly owing to the clean nature of the wound, partly to my own physical hardness after months of marching. Over the fireplace hung my mail and weapons, and above them, at Paulos's own wish, his banner which had waved above us during our struggle at the Astara defile. The old archer had revised his opinion of me apparently, and himself polished up my mail daily, sitting with Payindah in the sunlit verandah outside, exchanging broken phrases.

This morning, however, despite the peace of my surround-

ings, there was much to worry over. The previous day had brought a messenger from Kyrlos, whose army was now steadily pushing back the Shaman forces toward their fantastic hills, and with letters from Kyrlos came a characteristic note from Wrexham, a note which lay upon my little table, and which introduced an extraordinary complexity into things. For its brief contents informed Forsyth and me that we were likely to remain prisoners in Sakaeland for many, many months if not, perhaps, for ever; and what not so long before would have been to me at least a not unpleasant accident opened up now a prospect of weeks and months of Aryenis's company, when everything told me that the Aryenis I had saved in the gate had been saved for some one else; Andros's telltale eagle feathers were more illuminating than fifty statements.

I took up John's note again, scribbled in pencil on a sheet torn from his notebook.

DEAR H., — We have just pushed the Shamans over the border, and hammered them some in the process. But there is real bad news. I went with Stephnos's mounted men on the left, chasing some enemy cavalry. We halted that night within a mile or so of Kyrlos's house near the caves, and then learnt that the enemy had burnt the place. Being anxious about Sadiq and the camels, I rode up with some men in the morning, and the very first thing I ran into in the garden was poor Sadiq's body, much cut about. We went off straight to the caves, and almost at the mouth found a dead Blue Sakae, whom the men identified as one of the guard that had been left.

We followed the passage through the caves and down — the ropes were still in place — and then below the cliffs, even before we got down, the kites and ravens told us the worst. There were eight of the camels lying about dead with arrows sticking in them, and close by we found the bodies of the rest of the guard. Where the other two camels went, I don't know. Don't think they can have been taken round anywhere below the cliffs.

There was no one at the house able to give us any idea of what had happened. The old man who had been left in charge was dead. I think Sadiq must have come up with one of the guard to have a look round the place, and then fallen in with the enemy, who thereby dis-

covered the caves. Sadiq's uncommon clothes and appearance, and perhaps his speech, if they caught him alive, probably made them connect him with us, so they went down to look below, and finding the guard and camels killed the lot off. This seems to be the usual Shaman way of dealing with anything for which they have no immediate use.

So here we are fixed in Sakaeland until we can evolve some scheme of getting across the desert. At the moment I can think of nothing.

The news was pretty staggering, and, like Wrexham, I could think of no scheme whereby we could get back. Even if the two missing camels turned up, they would hardly suffice to carry water enough for the five of us to get back across the sands, even supposing the animals themselves could do the journey without any, which, after the outward march, it seemed pretty clear they could not.

Anyway, for the moment there was nothing to do but put the best face on matters, and content one's self with the present. Forsyth did not seem to take the news at all hardly, but then at the moment Sakaeland and Ziné, or rather Ziné in Sakaeland, completely filled his attention. Payindah, of course, was in no way perturbed, and merely considered it another good proof that we were meant to stop in the country and annex some of the land. He seemed to have made up his mind quite firmly on that point.

I was making pretence of deciphering an old manuscript of the fifth century which Paulos had lent me, a black-lettered parchment from the pen of the Bishop Basil, one of the little colony of Greeks who had somehow found their way across the desert into Sakaeland, and, converting many of the Sakae, had impressed upon them a considerable amount of the culture and taught them many of the arts of far Byzantium before, from intermarriage with the clans, they had disappeared as a separate people.

The bishop was an observant writer, and much of his work dealt with the social customs of the Sakae of his time, in many ways the same as those of to-day, notably, perhaps, in the matter of the independence of their women — a point

which found much praise from the worthy bishop, despite his Greek blood and training. He seemed to have been very enthusiastic over his new flock — savage enough then in many ways, but with the clean, healthy savagery that has appealed through all ages to your real ardent Christian missionary who has learnt the key truth of his Master's teaching — namely, that Christianity is a living fire, designed not to annihilate the God-given force of our own personality, but to direct its energies into the fitting channels which can remove mountains. The colourless outlook of some modern so-called followers of Christ would have seemed far less Christian to the bishop than the frank, virile savagery of his Sakae pagans. From his account these seem to have taken to him as frankly as they took to us. As he said in his manuscript: "Their errors are, as Saint Paul admonishes us, 'but human,' and for such surely God and His Son are wholly merciful."

Basil must have borne a strong family likeness to Saint Augustine among his Angle and Saxon pirates, savage men with the minds of little children. I conceived a liking for the old Greek, and under other circumstances would have read him with enthralling interest; but at the moment my mind was much too taken up with future prospects. Forsyth, having dressed my leg very early, had ridden to Miletis for the day — to see Ziné, I imagined — so that I was alone.

I was glad, therefore, when the shuffling tread outside informed me of Paulos's arrival. The shadows of his bearers darkened the doorway as they bore him on a sort of wicker couch with arms and placed him down between me and the fire, settled the rugs over his legs, and left us.

"We are two cripples now, Harilek," said he, smiling at me. "I suppose you are all impatience to be afoot again, but Forsyth tells me he will not let you off your bed for another ten days, whatever happens."

"No, Paulos, just now I am not ill content to rest here awhile; to look out upon your garden and read your manuscripts; to think a little from time to time, and, as we say, 'to make my soul' a bit. But I am afraid poor Bishop Basil

is somewhat neglected. There is much to think about — for instance, this disaster to our camels.”

“Let the dead bury their dead, lad. I am sorry that your man should have been killed, but for the rest I am frankly glad that Fate — if you choose to call it so — has intervened to keep you among us longer. Indeed, being privileged as an old man to speak my mind, I hope Fate, or Fate’s Master, will keep you with us for ever.”

“And do what, Paulos? Live on charity? You would be tired of guests whose visit was a lifetime.”

“What talk is this of charity when you and your friends have built up such claims upon us that fifty years were too short to repay? I told you before you left that my people already spoke of you as one of ourselves. But now your name is sung by every bard at every fireside. Listen, Harilek. If when the war is over you and your friends should find you cannot recross the desert — or perchance feel that you would wish to cast in your lot with ours, as did Basil and his companions — then remember that Kyrlos and I have broad lands, and there is no shame for a soldier to take land and title he has won in war. You will be robbing no one, for there are many vacant fiefs in the Green Sakae country, whose rightful owners have passed through the Shaman gate. You have told me that such honours have been accepted by soldiers in your own land, and none, I am sure, can have earned them better than you have done here.”

“Thank you, Paulos; I will remember. But for myself just now the thought of a life in Sakaeland is somewhat hard. A month ago no second invitation would have been needed. But now —” I stopped.

“But now a certain Andros wears a plume of eagle feathers bound with mauve, and Harilek is bedridden like a foolish old man who sits opposite to him — thought-reading! But time brings many things. At all times and always that offer will be open.”

Then he turned to the war news, which was good, and we discussed the prospects of the campaign. He opined that the

main struggle would come in the Shaman country itself, since Milos's reports from the north showed that the Red Sakae — save for isolated raids — were too disorganized to do much, and the sympathies of the majority were with us rather than with the Shamans, of whose rule the country-folk were heartily tired.

We spent a pleasant day together discussing an infinity of subjects, for Paulos is a cultured talker, and the most shrewdly observant man I have ever met. It was a daily wonder to me that an old cripple among a nation of rather primitive fighting men should have retained such a vivid interest in life. Once or twice we were interrupted by visitors — old grey-headed village headmen, who rode in seeking news, and appeared kindly anxious to greet me. It seemed that Paulos's statements as to his people's feeling in my regard were not exaggerated, for the Sakae are very transparent, and make no pretence of dissimulating likes or dislikes.

The early afternoon brought Philos's wife with her small son to ask after me, and to thank me for having saved her husband's life. Philos had gone on with the army the day after the Astara, having apparently given her a most exaggerated account of my doings, and, woman-like, she would take no notice of my version of the real facts. The boy sat on the foot of my bed playing with the sword which the old archer reached down for him from the wall, and studying me with great blue eyes. I envied Philos very much when she left again — a slim girlish figure in her riding-clothes — smiling us a farewell, and telling the boy to salute us both with my sword, which he was not at all ready to relinquish.

Paulos and I had just finished our afternoon glass of wine, when his apple-cheeked, wrinkled, white-haired housekeeper entered and spoke to him. I gathered from his tone that he was giving her some instructions. Shortly after she left us in came the old archer, evidently with some news. A little later, as Paulos's bearers came to carry him away, I heard horses' feet outside, and then Forsyth's voice calling to Payindah. I wondered if he had seen Ziné, and envied him being able to

ride about. I picked up Basil once more, and studied the crabbed writing by the light of the lamp which had just been lit. But my thoughts were very far removed from the good bishop's dissertation on Sakae customs. They were following a twisted chain, of which the nearest link was Philos's wife and her stout, little blue-eyed son; an intermediate link was connected with a fireside in Aornos and a talk of dragons; while somewhere in the mists at the far end was a dream vision seen by a tired man sleeping out on the stones, while Wrexham and Payindah held the mouth of the Shamans' gate. Then a footstep as some one pulled back the curtain and entered.

I looked up, and there, in the dim circle of the lamp and the bright glow of the fire — my lady herself, the big fur collar of her riding-coat thrown back, a sparkle in her eyes, and the glow of the winter wind in her cheeks, as she stood looking at me, pulling off her riding-gauntlets — my gauntlets.

"Aryenis!" I gasped, rather foolishly.

"Yes, Harilek. Aryenis in person, as you see." She came forward. "I thought I should like to win some more bets, and, since one-legged Harilek couldn't come to Miletis, two-legged Aryenis had to come here." Then her laughing note changed as she held out both her hands. "Are you badly hurt, Harilek?" — the laughing note came back — "or is it only another wiggly mark?"

She stood holding my hands, looking down at me, all the red-gold glory of her hair aflame in the firelight which played across her beautiful face, now lighting up the wonderful clear depths of her big hazel-grey eyes, now casting tender little shadows about the witching curves of her dear lips. Then, without waiting for an answer, she went on:

"Forsyth said you'd be in bed at least a fortnight, so I told Paulos that Ziné and I would come and stop with him, for a womanless house is no place for a wounded man. And the doctor fetched us to-day."

"And never told me why he was going to Miletis!"

"You didn't tell me — us — when you were coming here,"

retorted my lady, loosing her hands to take off her big coat. "Besides, surprises are always the nicest things, aren't they? Much better than the things you've been looking forward to, which sometimes don't turn out as nice as you've imagined them."

She pulled up a chair and sat down, only to get up again to rearrange the flowers on my little table.

"What helpless creatures men are! You've got the best violets out of my pet bed, and the poor little things are all squashed up anyhow." Then she turned on me.

"You're very tongue-tied, Harilek. You haven't even said you're pleased to see me, and you've not had a glimpse of me for over a fortnight."

"What's the good of saying things, Aryenis? You know — or you ought to — how more than glad I am to see you. Why, every day — " I broke off, remembering Andros.

"Yes? Every day? Go on," prompted my lady, arranging the neglected violets, her face turned half away.

"Well, every day, and every night, and all the time, I want to see you, Shahzadi, even if I don't say so."

"Women like being told the things they know," remarked Aryenis.

"Even ones with good memories?"

"The better their memories, the more they like it. So now you know."

Then she sat down in the chair, propping her rounded chin on one hand, as she does when she is thinking, looking at me silently. I turned over and pulled myself up on my pillows to see her better, and my ribs where the spear hit me hurt badly as I turned. I suppose Aryenis saw the grimace, for she was out of her chair in a flash to help me and to pack up the pillows.

"Does your leg hurt much, Harilek?" she asked, suddenly anxious.

"Nothing much. My side's all stiff, though; that's what caught me then."

"Your side?"

"Yes. I bumped a spear in the mix-up. Thanks to Paulos's mail, it didn't go in, but it's a bit sore. You see, your gift repaid your debt for you, all right, as you hoped it might."

"I didn't know. Tell me."

She was smoothing out my blankets as she spoke, and I lay silent, watching the movements of her slender, capable hands. Just then I felt more than I'd ever felt before that I would give my whole soul to have her slim arms about me and her lips on mine. However, I choked that down, and told her something about our last battle on the hill, she listening steady-eyed.

"So you think that the debt is repaid now, do you?" she said when I had finished. "That because Paulos's mail saved you from a chance blow in a fight fought for us that we are quits? You're wrong, Harilek." She bent over me. "For what you did for me in the gate — man with the wiggly marks — a whole lifetime's service would be all too short repayment."

Then she straightened up, ignoring my effort to catch her hands. "I must go and change into more suitable clothes now. And after dinner we'll all come and see you." And she went, leaving me with my mind all in a chaotic whirl, trying to reconcile her tone and her words with Andros's feathers.

Followed ten days in bed, no longer boresome, since it was lightened by Aryenis's continual visits. But for some days she seemed on the defensive, always selecting her times when Paulos was with me. Then she would sit for hours with her work listening to us talking, or telling us bits and scraps of homely news she had gathered in her morning rides round the estate. She seemed to have annexed Payindah, for that worthy was hardly ever to be seen of a morning, and, when I asked him where he went to, he answered, as though a matter of course, "Riding with the Shahzadi round your lands. She always rides your horse now."

At other times she would bring Ziné with her to help her in the lessons, as she said, for she and Paulos were making me learn Sakae, saying I would need it when I got about again.

I like Ziné very much: she is an ever-cheerful, chatty, friendly damsel, and very much more than very pretty, but Aryenis alone was ample company for me, and I'm sure Ziné would far rather have been wandering the woods with Forsyth. But I suppose Aryenis dominated her as she did every one else.

It was the tenth day after Aryenis's arrival — a very red-letter day when Alec had promoted me to a couch by the fire on condition that I kept my leg still, and further promised me that, if all went well, in two days' time I should be allowed to try a crutch and an arm in the garden — that the Ziné-Forsyth worm turned. At his morning visit, Paulos announced, with an enigmatical smile, that Forsyth and Ziné had ridden into Miletis, and would not be back till late: probably they would stay the night with Milos and Annais. Aryenis was out riding. "But I have told her that she must be back before lunch, for I have work this afternoon, and I cannot have my guest left lonely."

He had lunch served in my room that day, and Aryenis returned in a very talkative mood, with lots to say about all she had seen and done in the morning. Soon after lunch, Paulos went off, saying he had headmen to interview, so that for the first time for a week I got my lady all to myself, albeit I was propped up on a couch, and she had established herself on a low stool with an embroidery-frame on the other side of the hearth. We talked of many things, and then relapsed into silence, as one does with those one knows well. I considered her for a long time, her face partly hidden behind her stretched silk, while her busy fingers fluttered backward and forward over the pattern.

"That embroidery is rather like you, Shahzadi," said I at last.

"Like me?" she said, biting off a thread and looking up. "Why?"

"Because from where I sit I can see there's something interesting going on on the other side, but I can't make out what. And I'm very anxious to know."

"There you are." She turned over the frame, and I saw, what I had really guessed it was, Paulos's bear on the green ground. "Satisfied?"

"Oh, that; yes. But my curiosity was directed to the other side of *you*, not to your work."

"Do you think I'm going to turn myself inside out for inspection like I do my embroidery-frame, O Thought-Reader? If so, think again."

"I am."

Mutual silence, broken finally by Aryenis.

"And have our thoughts produced great results yet, O Wizard?" There was just a suspicion of curiosity in her tone.

"They are beginning to be illuminating."

Another silence, over which curiosity eventually won a decisive victory.

"And might a humble princess ask a distinguished warrior what his thoughts are?"

"She might. In fact, she actually has. But the term 'humble' is new and unfamiliar. I thought princesses, especially this one, only issued commands."

"So they do generally. But this one is at the moment faintly curious, and therefore make-believe humble. That is an unheard-of confession, but now you have it."

"It is, and consequently deserves reward. I'm just beginning to understand why Andros wears a plume of feathers bound with your own mauve."

Such understanding was immeasurably far from my intelligence, but I hoped the lie might draw.

"How very clever we are! And why does he wear it?"

The slender fingers were poised motionless over the embroidery.

"Because he asked you for it." This seemed a safe statement, but what was to come next, Heaven only knew.

"I'd never have forgiven you if you'd said I'd given it him because he didn't ask for it. Yes, well?" The fingers were busy once more.

"Well, that's all," I answered. My brain was petering out.

"And very lame, too, Harilek," she said, putting down her work and looking at me. "Andros comes to me with a bunch of feathers which are part of his dress, and asks me to make them up for him, as he's often asked me to do little things before. Harilek having — as he thinks, secretly — looked at me out of his window — yes, I saw you — spends nearly three weeks in deep thought over the matter. At the end of that time this marvellous thought-reader arrives at the stupendous conclusion that Andros asked me for his plume, and therefore wears it. Am I to admire this staggering piece of reasoning, O Harilek?" Her tone was mocking, but with a spice of tenderness in it, or so I thought.

"I — I thought you'd given them to him as — as a special favour," I stammered.

"I told you last time you tried thought-reading that, if any one wanted my favour, he'd have to *take* it. Your memory is very poor."

"It will be good in future, Shahzadi," said I humbly. "I'm glad the camels are dead."

Aryenis busied herself with her work once more, ignoring my last remark. Presently she said, without looking up:

"The day after to-morrow, the doctor says you can try and walk a little with a stick and an arm. Will you trust mine?"

"I'd trust your arm, Shahzadi, more than any arm in all the world. Just as I'd trust you with my whole soul and my hope of a life to come."

She made no reply to that, but I could see a tiny flush run into her cheeks, and a little happy quaver at the corner of her mouth. We relapsed into a long silence after that, but I think a contented one. Mine certainly was. Suddenly she lifted her head, listening:

"Horses! I wonder who it is so late? I wonder if it's news from the army."

She went out, and presently Wrexham's unmistakable tread came ringing down the passage, and he entered with a clank of war-gear, flinging his steel cap on to my bed.

"Good to see you out of bed again, Harry," he said, pulling up a stool and putting his feet to the blaze. "Aryenis says you'll be walking in a couple of days."

"Yes, so Alec promised. But what brings you back, John, and what's the news?"

"Fine. We chivied the Shamans right back to their city after a week's running fight through their hills. Filthiest tangle of knife-edges and precipitous gorges you ever saw. We took a minor knock or two, but on the whole we hustled them good and proper. Not many Shaman prisoners, but a lot of Brown Sakae. Stout savages like Pathans. Kyrlos says he's going to civilize them when he's done with the Shamans. Your pal Henga is up there — with the vanguard generally. He's a tiger and no mistake. Country up there is too bad for horses, so I deserted Stephnos and joined with Henga. He and I had a tophole picnic last week."

"But what have you come back for? It's not like you to miss a healthy scrap."

"Healthy scraps are off for the moment. As the learned used to say in the war, 'the front has stabilized.' In other words, we are sitting on three sides of the Shaman city — huge great walls and a devil of a ditch. The fourth side is sheer mountain near the gate where we found Aryenis. Kyrlos had two shots at assaulting the place, but they took tea with us over it. Now he says he's going to starve 'em out, but I think he's a bit of an optimist. They must have months of grub there. But it's just like a bit of an old book. Boiling lead, hide-covered towers, catapults, and battering-rams."

"Seems to suit you all right. But for the third time what's fetched you back? If you tell me it's to inquire after my leg, I'll say you're a d——d liar."

"I've come back rather hurriedly with some of Kyrlos's sappers to get engineer stores. I didn't think they'd get in for weeks and months at the rate they were going, and, having a brain wave or two, I talked with Kyrlos and Andros. Live man, Andros. The upshot was that I and my engineer pal — you know the funny bloke with the crooked nose —

with twenty picked men left Shamantown day before yesterday *en route* to Miletis. They're spending the night at Aornos, but I thought I'd sleep here if Paulos could give me a shake-down and they can pick me up in the morning. Aryenis says she can fix me up all right: gone to see about it now."

"What are engineer stores in this country?"

"Tell you in a fortnight's time. You'll be fit enough to sit a pony then, and can come and see the beano. If my calculations are right, it'll be worth seeing. Hulloa, here's Firoz come to make salaams."

Firoz, beaming all over, his steel cap adorned with a plume of cock's feathers from a dead Shaman, and his waist girt with a gay-woven belt from a similar source, entered to pass the time of day and give me a lurid account of the war — a first-class article according to him.

Wrexham borrowed Payindah to help him at Miletis. "I'd like to have both of them with me for the next ten days if you can spare him," he said as Firoz went out.

"Ask Aryenis. He's her shadow nowadays. But if you speak kindly to her, she'll let him go, I expect," said I.

Just then the lady came in to show Wrexham the room she had had fixed up for him. It was rather wasted, because he sat on my bed till long after midnight, telling me of all the "picnics" and "shows" that he and Henga had had. I could picture the pair together: they are very much of a type.

Somewhere about ten o'clock Aryenis came in to say good-night to us, and despite John's battle yarns my last waking moments were much more concerned with her than with any of his staccato stirring stories. As Aryenis said, "Toys all," compared to other things: things like red-gold hair and hazel-grey eyes, slim white arms and warm red lips, for instance.

CHAPTER XXIV

I WIN MY BET

THE ten days following my first walk in the garden had passed all too quickly. My leg was now completely healed, although a trifle stiff, and a considerable hindrance in walking any distance. But there was no longer any need for the crutch with which I had made my *début* the day after Wrexham's departure for Miletis, and, much as I was loath to admit it, no further actual necessity for Aryenis's arm, which had aided my first dot-and-carry-one efforts round the little walled garden.

Ten days' undiluted bliss they had been, with day after long day in my lady's company, at first short strolls, punctuated by long rests in the gardens about the house — sitting in the winter sunlight — then longer walks in the grounds; and of late rides into her beloved woods, elm and birch bare of leaf, and pines in their sombre green, with under foot the matted pine-needles or the thick mass of fallen leaves, last relics of the dying year.

And day after day Aryenis unfolded more and more each new day bringing forth some new charm, some little turn of speech, some little gesture, to be visualized again and again. The long silences that come when friendship has ripened into love, when, for the time being, all happiness lies in the mere fact of being together, when the delight of simple companionship has replaced the demand for speech or self-expression, when you have learnt to be utterly contented with the mere proximity of the beloved, and words are daily less and less expressive and important, since you have passed the need for the externals that mere acquaintanceship or friendship demand — sometimes so clamorously.

It was sheer delight to me to watch Aryenis — so quick of speech in company — grow silent when we were alone; to try

to fathom the thoughts behind her eyes as we rode or as we sat together in some corner of the wooded hills overlooking the rich rolling country spread below us. To catch her slow, questioning glance — that sought no answer in words — or listen to her little laugh that spelt the uttermost height and breadth and depth of rich content.

Life was very good those days — days which formed a little haven on the road that comes from nowhere and leads to Heaven knows where. It was more than unpleasing to think that another three or four days would see me riding again down the Aornos road with John and his train of stores to what we hoped would be the last act of the Shaman drama. Alec had already gone on to join Kyrlos, since I had no further need of his attentions. As we had expected, his medical knowledge had wonderfully impressed the Sakae, and his war-time experience enabled him to do some very useful work at the present juncture — the more so since the Sakae were just the class of uncomplaining, clean-fleshed patients that every surgeon loves. Moreover, he had ridden away with a dainty little cockade in his steel cap, and it was a very bright-eyed Ziné who had come riding up the winding lane to where Aryenis and I sat in the garden whence we had seen Forsyth ride off. Since also I had seen nothing more of the two girls for the rest of the morning, I concluded that Forsyth had at last really found some one who did not remind him of any one else, some one who was herself, and herself alone at every point.

And here was I sitting by the fire in Paulos's hall, with the deer-antlers and the trophies dim above me under the shadows of the wide-timbered arches in the early winter evening, waiting for Aryenis to come downstairs from changing out of her riding-clothes. We were just back from taking Ziné to Aornos, where she had gone to spend a couple of days with Torka and his wife, a long-promised visit. Paulos, after announcing that we would dine rather later that night, had shut himself up with his steward and a bundle of land-rolls. This, since it was only just five, there would be something

like three very cosy hours of firelit winter evening before dinner. And evenings with Aryenis under such conditions were, if anything, even more precious than the sunlit days in her woods.

She came at last — a slim figure on the dark stairs, gown of blue-embroidered white silk, bare of neck and arm, the gold clasps in her hair sparkling in the firelight as she seated herself on the low settle by the fire opposite to where I sat on the couch, wherein not so long before I had been a prisoner tied by the leg.

"No work to-night, Shahzadi?" I questioned. She sat there most evenings — her deft fingers busy with one or other of the endless sewing jobs that every really home-loving woman seems always to have on hand.

"No. I don't feel like sewing to-night."

"What do you feel like, then, lady of the red-gold locks?"

"Like sitting by the fire — and just — well, looking at it — and thinking."

"Then we feel alike. I've been doing that, too. There was only one thing lacking."

"What was that?"

"You to look at."

"Does that help your thinking process?"

"Quite a lot. In fact, I've got to the stage of not being able to think sensibly without having you to look at."

"But that's bad, Harilek. What will you do when you go away again?"

"Come back just as soon as I can."

"Silly! What I mean is, how will you think when you're away if you can't do it without some one to look at to make your thoughts work?"

"Shut my eyes and look at you. Thank goodness, I can always do that." Which was true. I have only to shut my eyes to see Aryenis in every point, every little precious detail from the thick crown of her auburn hair down to her dainty feet. More; I can see her every movement, and some-

times when I am lucky really hear her voice — phrase after well-remembered phrase.

“Can you *really* see me?”

“Of course I can. Can't you see me if you shut your eyes?”

“Suppose I say I can't?”

“Then I shan't believe you.”

“Do you think that, even if I could, being a woman, I would admit it?”

“You might, perhaps. Under certain conditions.”

“I wonder if that's true,” said Aryenis, contemplating the fire's molten heart. “You speak sometimes as if you thought you knew all about me. But you don't really.”

“I do, though. Quite a lot. Shall I tell you your life-history?”

She looked up at me from the fire. “I love being told — stories,” she said half seriously, half mockingly.

“Well, once upon a time there was a very beautiful princess —”

“All stories begin that way,” she interrupted.

“Yes; that shows they're true. Anyway, once upon a time there was a very beautiful princess, whom some people called ‘Shahzadi.’”

I waited for the interruption which didn't come.

“Called her ‘Shahzadi.’ And she lived in a very beautiful country, only it was not half as beautiful as she. Then once she ran into a lot of dragons — nasty ones, not the friendly kind — and she looked around for a fairy prince.”

“She didn't. She'd given up all hopes of fairy princes then.”

“She must have been right, for no prince came, but a swineherd arrived —”

“No! A prince: a real live prince.”

“A swineherd disguised as — as — a soldier, turned up in proper ragged clothes, and argued with the dragons, and that was the end of them. Then he took the princess back to her father's castle, and there was no end of rejoicing. When the swineherd and his friends got to Aryenis's castle they found

that her father had a war on with the dragons, and so they joined in with him, and he lent them clothes to make them look like princes."

"Not true. A fairy godfather gave the prince some clothes such as he ought *always* to have been wearing instead of ragged disguises."

"So, being rigged out as a prince, the swineherd began to think about the princess. Only she had carefully changed her clothes and done her hair differently, so that she was very hard to recognize, so hard that when the swineherd went off to fight the dragons again he really couldn't find her at all."

"That was because he was a fool and didn't look properly. I said all fairy princes were fools."

But she didn't say it quite so incisively this time.

"Then, when he met the dragons, one of them bit him, and he came home on the flat of his back with lots of time to think. While he was lying in the fairy godfather's house, he thought out a plan for finding out where and who the princess really was. You see the dragon's bite had quickened up his brain. It's a way dragon's teeth have. And that's the end of part one."

"Go on, Harilek, quickly! Don't stop at all the best parts."

"That is the real story-teller's trick to make people pay up. I can't go on unless I'm paid."

"What is the price, trickster?"

"Quite cheap. A seat on my couch here."

"That's a big price, much too big. I'm very comfy where I am." She settled back cosily into her seat.

"All right, lady. No payment — no story. What shall we talk about now?"

Aryenis pondered awhile. Then she got up slowly, and still more slowly came over to sit disdainfully on the extreme corner of the couch, face well averted.

"The price is terribly high — but the story *might* be worth it. You may continue."

"A lady who looked rather like the princess came to

stay with the fairy godfather, some one whom the swine-herd had met before — in fact, he'd once made a bet with her."

"And lost."

"Yes, and lost. But he was heaps cleverer now. He remembered that the real princess had a fairy mark on her right shoulder, that no one could see. What's the matter, Shahzadi?"

"Nothing. Why?"

"I thought you were slipping off the couch."

"I wasn't," very indignantly. "I'm paying for my story all right. I never cheat." She edged back quite half an inch on to the couch again.

"Well, he decided that, if he could find the mark and also read the lady's thoughts correctly, he would know if she really was the princess. So he waited for many days looking for a really good opportunity."

"Yes. Very many days."

"Until finally he thought that he had hit the right time. So one evening he got very close to the lady he thought was the princess."

"By a trick!"

"As you say, by a trick. I said he was getting clever. He managed to get quite close to her, and then he put his arm round her so that she couldn't get away — like that."

Aryenis suffered it.

"And then he wondered whether the first thing would be to read her thoughts or to look for the fairy mark. But he decided that the important point was first to see if she had the proper mark. So he drew her closer."

Aryenis kept her face resolutely turned away. I wonder she didn't get a crick in her neck. Besides, it must be painful to have some one speaking right into your ear.

"Pulled her quite close, and then — I wonder what he did then."

No answer.

"Well, he very rudely — really quite rudely — slipped her

low-necked frock a little lower down — so — and there, if you please, was the fairy mark."

It was there. A little pink scar hitherto hidden by her dress, a tiny, straight, nowise unsightly cut across the ivory of her skin, now rose-pink in the firelight against the white silk and dainty mauve ribbons suddenly disclosed. Aryenis was very still, but unresisting as I turned her dear face round.

"And then he was nearly sure, but to be quite certain he decided to read her thoughts. And when he looked into her eyes he saw that she was wondering which —"

I stopped, and Aryenis looked up at me with eyes half-veiled under the drooping lids.

"Which?" she whispered, as I remained silent.

"Which — he would — kiss first. The fairy mark or her lips?"

And then I knew that I won my bet.

For a moment Aryenis did nothing, just lay quite still in my arms, one beautiful shoulder gleaming in the firelight, looking up at me with eyes now wholly dark and a mouth a thousand times more kissable than I had ever known it before. Then a slim arm that seemed made of live fire slipped round my neck, drawing my head down.

I suppose it was really a very long time after that before we returned to mere commonplaces of speech. An altogether new and even more completely adorable Aryenis cuddled cosily against me — an entirely surrendered Aryenis, with flushed cheeks and disgracefully and very beautifully untidy hair.

"Are you aware that you've lost your bet, sweetheart?" said I at last.

"Quite aware, fairy prince; and ready and glad to pay forfeit."

She slipped up still closer for another kiss.

"A piece of mauve ribbon, you remember. The kind you wore that night we made the bet."

"Yes, Harilek mine; my memory is still quite good. I'm wearing such to-night. Perhaps" — her eyes were very soft

as she looked up — “perhaps I had a presentiment I should lose this evening.” Her eyelids drooped again.

“I believe you did, sweetheart. And now I’m going to make you pay up.” And I commenced to collect payment.

“This is the ‘offensive action’ part, I suppose. But don’t tear my clothes, *please*, Harilek. That bow comes undone quite easily.”

It did — as she said — and between kisses I annexed my prize.

“And what are you going to do with it?” she asked, straightening her dress as I folded up my piece of ribbon.

“Put it in my cap, so that all the world may know what I’ve won.”

“You’ll spoil it! Give it back to me and I’ll put it on properly myself.” She took it out of my hand. Then, in a proud voice, “I told you that if any one wanted my favour he would have to *take* it!”

“And I told you I should remember that remark.”

“What a wonderful memory you’re getting these days! What else do you remember?”

So I told her other memories, some of which had to be hurriedly suppressed by kisses, until the tread of Paulos’s bearers in the passage caused her to fly upstairs like a startled deer. And it was a long time before she joined us in the dining-hall, very neat and tidy as to hair and frock, but with warm cheeks and eyes that refused to be disguised.

Paulos — as ever — was very understanding, although he did express anxiety about our appetites. After dinner, when the servants had left and we three were sitting round the fire, Aryenis next to me, but very far off — nearly a foot away she must have been — I decided to burn my boats.

“Paulos,” said I, “do you remember our talk about land?”

“Yes, lad, I do quite well.”

“Then I thought I’d tell you now that I’ve decided to take your offer and stop in Sakaeland.” I caught Aryenis as she tried to escape. “You see, I’ve found some one to help me

with your people, some one to make me really one of you. To-morrow you will see a favour of mauve ribbon upon your steel cap that I wear. And your mail is going to be worn by Aryenis's husband."

"I always thought so from the first day I gave it you and Aryenis helped you put it on," said Paulos simply. "I won't talk banalities about being glad. You both know that. Come here, Aryenis."

She went obediently, but very shyly, and he kissed her twice. "You found much more than life in the gate, child. You found life, and what is more, the best thing in the world that sometimes — alas! only sometimes — goes with it."

He turned to me.

"Go to my room, Harilek, and fetch me that carved wooden box that stands upon my table."

I went and brought the box, heavily carved in some scented wood, Paulos's crest in the panel in the centre, and put it down by him. He opened it with a little key, and took out something wrapped in embroidered silk which he unfolded. As he did so I heard Aryenis, standing close — very close now — to me, give a little gasp of pleasure. It was a plain thin bangle of gold, hardly thicker than thin wire, but one of the kind which engaged girls among the Sakae always wear. But for the most part they are made of silver, since gold is very rare.

"That, Harilek," he said, passing it to me, "I have treasured for more years than I like to think. I had it made when I was younger than you are for a lady I hoped and prayed would wear it. But there was some one else she preferred, and so it has been locked up all these years. I should like Aryenis to wear it now, if you will take it from me as a gift."

"Gladly, Paulos. I would far rather that than one I might buy myself."

So, with Paulos to witness, I slipped the bangle on to Aryenis's arm, stumbling through the old formal Sakae words of promise, which time-honoured custom connects with a betrothal.

Paulos left us early, which was kind of him, after telling Aryenis to come and say good-night to him later.

"Satisfied now, my own?" said my lady, cuddling close as we sat by the fire in the half-dark after Paulos had gone. "Sakaeland for the rest of your life — no more things that fly and no more wonderful toys?"

"More than satisfied, sweetheart, since it means *you* for the rest of my life, which is all I ask for. You've shown me that everything else is toys, and between us we're going to find the things 'that really matter.' "

"I'm so glad that you understand, even though you are a man. But, Harilek" — shyly — "how long have you been in love with me? *Really* in love, I mean?"

"Ever since that night outside the gate, I think, heart's delight."

"I'm so glad. You see, I wasn't in love with you until ever so long after that. Not until — oh, until —"

"Until when?"

Aryenis buried her face in my shoulder.

"Oh, not — not until we'd gone quite three miles on the camel next morning. At least, I wasn't sure till then."

"That was a long time, Shahzadi," I laughed.

"It was." She looked up reprovingly. "But I really liked you quite a lot before that, too. But tell me, Harilek, what are we going to do now?"

"We are going to get married the very instant your father's finished off the Shamans. We've wasted a lot of time already."

Aryenis veiled her eyes again as she answered. "Yes — perhaps we have — only really it was *you* that wasted it."

"Mauve-bound eagle feathers," said I.

My Shahzadi buried her face in my arm once more, and it took a lot of persuasion — of the labial kind — before I could see it again.

CHAPTER XXV

SHAMANTOWN

BEFORE us towered up the great walls of Shamantown, grey weathered stone, rising up for forty feet and more before jutting out into overhanging galleries, arrow-slitted through all their length. All round the grim walls ran a sheer rock crevice, in which — twenty feet below us — flowed a slow stream of sluggish, black, oily water. This precipitous moat was crossed at one point by a narrow bridge of natural rock, the one weak spot in an otherwise impregnable defence.

On the far side of the bridge the entry-way ran in a narrow passage, flanked by loopholes, at whose end were the great gates of iron-shod timber, no wise different from the stone one we had seen in the *tangi*. But that place of death was now hidden from us by the stupendous wall of cliff under whose shelter nestled the Shaman stronghold. Lying in grotesque twisted attitudes about the farther end of the bridge and in the narrow passage were the bodies of some of the men Kyrlos had lost in his first efforts to storm his way in.

The walls were crowned with tall catapults, and now and again a great stone or a shower of lighter stuff would crash past where Kyrlos, Andros, Wrexham, and I crouched in the shelter of a timber mantlet studying the entry. Or a long-shafted arrow would thud into the stout wood or stand quivering near by in the damp soil. Away, on either hand, reaching round to the cliffs that backed the city, was our long besieging line, breastwork and sentry's shelter, catapult and wooden tower, with behind them the little tents and huts of Kyrlos's army, for we had driven the Shamans to their lair, and ringed them with a ring of steel.

Behind us, in all the twenty miles of jagged hill country that Wrexham and I, with his train of mysterious engineer stores, had traversed after crossing the fertile river plains be-

yond the Blue Sakae country, was no single Shaman, only the gaunt bands of outlaws and masterless men, and the raiding gangs of the Brown Sakae, who roved hither and thither pillaging what the Shamans had left. But these constituted no menace to us, and could be dealt with at leisure once the chief enemy had been crushed.

We had ridden from Aornos a week before, and Aryenis's dear farewells were still fresh in my memory, the last glimpse of her on her grey mare at the turning of the lane into the Aornos road, where she and I had ridden to await Wrexham's party, still vivid to my mind. For two days afterward we had ridden steadily southwest, past the battle-field of the Astara with its heavy-winged vultures and jet-black ravens, past the frontier forts, over the ravaged fields and derelict villages into the maze of Shaman hills, where now and again upon some prominent peak we saw the glitter of steel in the little stone-ringed shelters, marking the detachments left by our people as they followed the retreating Shamans.

On our arrival Kyrlos had greeted me open-armed, and I felt, indeed, that, as Paulos insisted, I had become one of themselves. Aryenis and I had written to her father the day after that unforgettable evening, and his answer was in all ways satisfactory, while his words, when we met, left no shadow of doubt as to his real pleasure at the news we had sent him. Andros, whom I half-expected to find anything but friendly, was friendship personified.

"So you are now loudly one of us, Harilek," he had said as he greeted me. "I told you at the Astara that you were to be envied, and now that gay touch of colour in your cap proves my statement true. You have taken the fairest flower in all Sakaeland, but — and I speak as one knowing — you have fairly earned it. I know Aryenis will be utterly happy, and that is the greatest wish that I — her friend — can have."

And he wrung my hand, looking me honestly in the eyes. I consider that Andros is all that a man ought to be.

I had joined the army at Aornos almost a stranger. I re-

joined it in front of Shamantown as one coming back to his own, with Paulos's men — who, reinforced, had preceded us by three days — fallen in under Philos to lower blade in salute as we rode in, and many acquaintances to greet me with honest, if disconcertingly straightforward, appreciation. The lower ranks swarmed about Payindah, for whom they entertained a real friendliness, and I saw him but little that evening. His stay with John at Miletis had been productive of still greater admiration of Sakaeland and Sakae ways due, perhaps, to the now indefinite period we were like to remain in the country. Perhaps the matter of Aryenis had also somewhat to do with it, and he was very insistent on the accuracy of his forecasts in that direction. I think also that the charms of Temra's sister-in-law, a well-made, pleasing-looking damsel with dark locks, had some corner in his thoughts. He seemed to have picked up a lot more Sakae in the last fortnight, and I had noticed that women are quicker teachers than men.

The last month had been productive of so much, it seemed to me, as I reflected in the shelter of our mantlet — productive of a complete alteration in life, above all of that greatest of gifts at which Aryenis had hinted as we rode to Miletis the first time: "Not only life, but lots and lots more."

Kyrlos's voice brought me back to the present.

"And now, Wrexham, my friend, will you outline your plan once more? It seems to me good, if, indeed, this wondrous powder of yours will work."

"Work I hope it will, Kyrlos. It is not of the best, for I have had to use crude materials, but our experiments make me think it should serve our turn."

It was only the day we left Aornos that John had told me what was the bulk of his mysterious "engineer stores." Nothing less than coarse-made gunpowder. As I have mentioned, he spent all his time pottering about the workshops or visiting the markets in Miletis, and considering what modern conveniences might be made with local material. Among his other finds had been the discovery of saltpetre.

Sulphur was common, and charcoal was, of course, to be had in unlimited amounts, for the Sakae use it a good deal for household purposes, small braziers which can be carried from room to room.

The first two attempts to storm the Shamans' defences had led him to the conclusion that the siege would last for months if some means other than the mediæval ones available could not be found. Hence his talks with Kyrlos and Andros, culminating in his return to Miletis accompanied by his crooked-nosed engineer friend. His experiments had justified his hopes, and, still more wonderful, none of his band of assistants had so far blown themselves up, though many were blackened and speckled of face and hand, and singed of brow and moustache.

But they were full of keenness, and what was almost as important, they obeyed Wrexham implicitly. So now — stored under safe guard — was a pile of tarred sacks filled with John's home-made powder, and long coils of fuse, the sewing of which had taken many women many days. Coarse-grained stuff it was, and the fuse burned with an irregularity that would have horrified any inspector of ordnance stores, but — it did burn. So with his score of henchmen the irrepressible John proposed to cross the little bridge at dawn, dump his joyously uncertain powder against the gates, lay his hopelessly erratic fuses, touch them off, and hope for the best.

Behind him was to be a storming party under Henga ready to rush the gate defences if and when the powder exploded, while following on their heels would come Andros with the bulk of the troops to storm through the town up to the main citadel. I was thankful for the still doubtful leg which prevented me from running much, being quite content to assist Alec and Payindah with a rifle in covering the loopholes as the explosive party went in. But Alec — whether from a desire to shine in Ziné's eyes or from honest lust of battle I cannot say — intended to join Henga in the assault. Myself, I proposed to follow very quietly in the crowd, hav-

ing no desire to get mixed up with a hand-to-hand *mêlée* until my leg was good once more.

I listened to John explaining the details of his plan, Kyrlos listening gravely, and Andros's quick brain ready with ever-pertinent questions. The plan as plan was quite simple. Wrexham with ten men with powder-bags would cross the bridge and lay their charges. With them would go ten of Henga's men to protect them in their work as far as protection was possible; but the chief danger lay in missiles from the walls, and against these little could be done. Behind them would be twenty picked stalwarts of Stephnos's troops with bags of earth to damp the powder, and lastly, six men with lighting gear, led by the crooked-nose engineer.

If the charges could be laid and fired — both of which propositions were distinctly doubtful in view of the narrow approach, the poor powder, and the uncertain fuses — there was no doubt that the Shamans — completely unaccustomed to explosives — would be thrown into such confusion that Henga's party should be able to rush the gate defences, and we should then win our way into the city. But John was confident that it could and would be done.

“I'm laying six fuses, and some of them must work. I've drilled my party day after day at Miletis until they're word perfect. I had a mud replica of the gateway made, same as we used to do before attacks in the war, and every man knows his job. I suppose we've laid that charge thirty times, and the dummy puffs I put in at the end generally went off. The only thing missing was the Shamans popping at us through the loopholes. But with a decent modicum of luck we shall do it.”

Certainly if it could be done he was the man to do it; and early next morning, as I watched the shadowy masses of men collecting noiselessly in position for the assault, saw the dim glitter of cap and weapon, heard the soft chink of mail and the swish of leather, listened to the whispered words of command, I felt that, if energy and resolution counted at all in the scales, we deserved to win. With three seasoned fighters

like Andros, Henga, and John Wrexham to direct, youths of the type of Stephnos to lead, and infantry of the kind I had commanded at the Astara to follow, given an open road not all the Shamans in Shamantown could block our way.

"Time's getting on," said Wrexham, looking at his wrist-watch, luminous in the darkness. "We shall be able to see the walls in another twenty minutes."

Five minutes later Henga reported his storming party in position. Then came Andros for a last word or two before the ball opened. The jagged mountains to the eastward were clear-cut against the lightening sky as John with his powder-men and their escort moved silently toward the bridge — now faintly visible in the gloom — to disappear in the formless dark ahead. A sleepy sentry's hail broke the still silence, and a moment later, as the sandbag party dashed on to the bridge, a wavering torch sprang into light above the battlements to whirl downwards and vanish as one of Wrexham's party flung himself upon it. Loud shouts and cries above the walls told us that the Shamans had realized that an attack was again afoot, and arrows began to whiz down upon the bridge, striking sparks from the stonework, while above the gates a great beacon flamed into red light, showing the explosive party clustered under the great doors at the far end of the narrow entry-passage.

Then back across the bridge, running heads down for dear life among the glancing arrows, came the powder-men. Nine of them we counted — the tenth lay still where he had fallen on the bridge, one limp arm dangling above the dark gulf, the slender arrow shaft in his back stark black against the stonework, now grey in the growing light.

Two minutes later the shrill call of Wrexham's bugler brought the lighting party racing over the arrow-swept causeway, the last man across spinning forward over the unguarded side, splash into the sluggish stream below, as an arrow took him full in the chest. And as they crossed, the sandbag party came leaping back over the bridge. By some chance seventeen of them returned untouched, though now

the full dawn light had come, but the other three lay dead in the passage beyond. John was all right, they told us, and the powder in position. There was now light enough to shoot, and we three opened with our rifles upon the wall above the gates, while away to right and left our bowmen loosed flight after flight of arrows against the packed defences. The dawn silence had given place to a medley of shouts, of high-pitched cries, of clamorous bugle notes, and on the walls in front hurried rush and clash of armed and half-armed men.

Then suddenly back in a whirl down the passage came a dozen men, some bleeding from wounds, the bugler with an arrow sticking through his arm, and — thank goodness! — at the back of the bunch, John's unmistakable sturdy figure with Firoz and the crooked-nosed engineer behind him. They neared the bridge, arrows flying all about them. Then the man in front of Wrexham pitched forward on his face, struggled and lay still. The Sakae engineer tripped over him, went down, and, as he rose again, slid down once more, clutching his leg below the knee, trying to pull out an arrow.

He had dropped behind John and Firoz, who, not noting his fall, came flying across, untouched. The engineer tried to crawl on to the bridge amid the hail of arrows. But Forsyth, running like a greyhound, was out and over the gulf before we even realized what he was doing. Stopping, stooping, and turning all at once, he started back with the engineer — a light wiry man — in his arms. With great long strides he raced back over the bridge, and, unscathed, laid the wounded man down under cover just ahead of us. Our men cheered him like mad as he returned, for the Sakae prize personal courage above all things in the world. Certainly Ziné would have no cause to worry about the way her favour had been borne.

Almost as he reached us there was a great sheet of red flame in front, a hot breath, a jar like a blow in the face, and a thunderous roar as the fort gate and the surrounding walls vanished in a dense cloud of thick white smoke, and Henga

and his company — Forsyth in the van — swept across the bridge, axe and sword and spear-point gleaming in the morning light. With them went John, followed by Firoz to see if the powder had done its work.

But as the smoke cleared with it went our doubts. One of the great iron-bound wings of the door had clean vanished, while the other hung drunkenly from its shattered hinges, and in the dark gap we could see the last of Henga's men crowding into the defences. A moment later Andros's bugles sang to the assault, and his men poured over the bridge in an unceasing stream of close-packed ranks. We watched them crush through the shattered gateway, while on the walls above we saw Henga's men fighting their way back, clearing the parapets on either side to secure the entrance passage.

It was light enough for glasses now, and once I made out on the right-hand wall Alec's tall figure, pistol and sword in hand, forcing his way into the Shamans, blade and axe awhirl about him where Henga's stout Sakae settled outstanding scores of raid and rapine of years past. The enemy were pressed back and ever back, until the walls were clear of them right down to the bridgehead, and the arrows ceased to whiz down about us.

A little later, riding with Kyrlos, I passed up through the narrow passage, strewn, alas! with men of ours, in through the broken, blackened gates, up the steep entry-way, and so into the rabbit-warren of Shamantown, littered with stark corpses and dying men, desolate broken house-doors, and wailing, dishevelled Shaman women, and once or twice a drawn-visaged Sakae woman — prize of some past raid — shrilling her glad pæan of hate at the retribution that had come at last.

And once, one of our Blue Sakae in worn leather, his bloody sword hanging from his wrist, and his arms about a girl who clung to him, her face close to his. I shall never forget the wonderful light of unbelievable hope dawning in the girl's eyes as she understood that the past had gone like an evil dream, that life had opened out anew, and from black

despair had come all joy and gladness, nor the look of quiet happiness on the man's gaunt face as he realized that he had, indeed, cheated fate and won back all that made his life.

We pushed on up the main street amid the shattered shops. Andros's discipline was good, and there was no looting as yet. The Sakae were far too busy killing, for the Shamans gave no quarter, looked for none, and got but little. There was bitter house-to-house fighting in some quarters, little bodies of men fighting in the narrow lanes where they penned isolated groups of Shamans into *culs-de-sac*, and killed them out. But the bulk of our troops had pressed on toward the great cliff-face behind the city, where, hewn into the solid rock, was the citadel.

The dead and wounded were thicker again as we drew near the open space below the cliffs and then checked, where ahead of us the fight eddied and swayed about the narrow archway leading into the rock. The first rush of Andros's men had cleared right up the main street into the open square, where high above us showed the rock-hewn windows, whence the chief Shaman gazed down upon the huddled mass of houses below, like a vulture craning its evil gaze from its foul roost. Grim above the frowning entrance were the long projecting beams whence swayed on weathered ropes limp corpses of our men — captured in the earlier assaults. The kites and ravens circled about them, perching on the dangling forms or hovering about the eddying fight below.

The narrow gateway was choked with bodies, and, as Kyrlos and I came up, pushing our ponies through the crush of men, we saw Andros with Forsyth, who had evidently joined him after the city wall had been cleared, followed by a rush of swordsmen, disappear into the dark passage beyond, and the fight round the entrance stilled and ceased as the last enemy were beaten down. We waited awhile, looking up at the tremendous wall above us, whence rained down stones and arrows, and saw upon the topmost terrace pigmy figures in glinting steel. John and Firoz pushed their way up to us.

"How's the show, Harry? Henga's finished mopping up

below. He's coming up with his men now, red-hot to get into the citadel and finish off some blood feud he's got on hand."

"Don't know much what's doing. Andros and Alec with a lot of men are inside that gate ahead now. Isn't it a hell of a place!"

"Look at those poor devils hanging there!" said John, pointing. "Henga told me the Shamans killed their prisoners. But that one was a woman! See? Bloody swine! Here, I'm going after Andros to help in the finish."

I had started with the best of good intentions to avoid all unseemly brawls, but somehow or other I found myself throwing my reins to one of the men and following John into the dark blood-smeared gate with Payindah and some of my archers behind me. We followed a long, dark, winding passage, smooth with the passing of centuries, grimy with the soot of torches. Now and then we tripped over huddled forms, and here and there passed wounded men making their painful way back to the daylight outside. At one corner, looking into some windowless cells, lit now by the red glow of torches, we saw some of Andros's men. They were standing silent with grim faces, while two of their number were freeing an almost unrecognizable thing that had once been a man — Blue Sakae by the tattoo-marks on his shoulders — from a contraption of rusty iron bands and chains that bound him to the wall. Sightless and mutilated, if ever anything cried aloud for vengeance that poor human rag, that still just breathed, did so. I was nearly sick as I came out and went on up the passage, and I could hear John's teeth gritting.

Then, in an open circular space like a great well, still all hewn from the solid rock, we came upon the vanguard of our people, Andros and Alec directing, where, clustered upon a flight of rock-hewn steps, several men strove with hammer and crow to prize open an enormous circular iron door which closed the top of the shaft as a trapdoor does a well. The air was hot, and I could see the sweat on the men's faces as they worked in the torches' smoky glare. Alec came down the steps when he saw us, his mail scarred and dirty, blood down

one leg from a scratch across the thigh, and a baresark light in his blue eyes.

"Come on, John; for God's sake, lend a hand! They've shut that trapdoor down and got a fire going on top!"

Wrexham went up the steps where the men beat ineffectually upon the iron door, the clanging echoes of their blows ringing dully in the well-like shaft. He laid his hand on the iron and drew it away with an oath. Then he studied the trapdoor and the wall around it for a while before coming down to where Andros had joined Alec and me at the foot of the shaft.

"They've stymied us all right for the moment," he said, sucking his burnt hand. "You could hammer on that all day without making any impression. And before long the whole thing will be red-hot. Powder's our only chance, though I don't know if I can get it into place without being pushed off ourselves in the process. Luckily the bags are tarred, so we can wrap wet blankets round them as a precaution against sparks from the torches. Here, Alec; you can go quicker than Harry. Cut along and get up my sapper blokes."

He gave the doctor a long list of gear to bring up. Then he turned and explained his plan to Andros, who hurried off to improvise another storming party.

The heat was getting stifling, and the men peeled off their mail and leather. I took another look around the shaft in the flickering torchlight. There were slits around us, evidently loopholes of a flanking passage, and before each waited an archer with bow ready strung and arrow in place, ready to loose at the first movement. From the bodies dotted about I guessed that those loopholes had paid for their construction when our people first got into the shaft. But the enemy had been driven out now and made no sign.

"I'd like to have driven a chamber under the edge of the trapdoor," said Wrexham, mopping his face, "but the whole thing's solid rock. It must have taken years and years to make."

"How are you going to do it now?"

"Simply pile up the powder in the middle, and block the passage with sandbags to prevent it blowing back. It'll be a three-hour job, at least. God send a spark doesn't push us all off while we're working. We must have a chain of water-men going all the time to keep things damp."

"Well, I'm going back outside for a bit; it's too hot in here. I'll tell Andros to send up more men to relieve your birds at the loopholes, and then I'll bring up my own people to take a hand."

So, calling Payindah and my men, I went back down the long dark passage with its evil prison cells, and, warned by experience, did not investigate too closely. There were men of ours in most of them seeking round with torches, and from the looks on their faces I argued there would be scant shrift for such of the enemy as were caught above.

At last I stood in the bright sunlight at the entrance, blinking like an owl, and drinking in great gulps of clean air after the foetid atmosphere within, feeling like one come straight out of hell.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE GATE AGAIN

THERE was no fighting near by, though sounds of battle still came from the buildings on my right, where some of the enemy were resisting. On the far side of the open space our men were being reorganized, and all down the long street small bodies of troops were collecting the inhabitants so as to clear that quarter of the town. The first lust for killing had passed, and, as I entered the main street, I passed sullen groups of prisoners, powerfully built, cruel-looking men, darker-skinned than their captors. Again I remarked that faint trace of Mongoloid blood that I had noticed in Atana's face.

Some looting had started, as was inevitable, but it was quickly put down with a firm hand, and all valuables and stores were collected under guard, to be distributed in due shares later. Kyrlos stood for order and good government, and he intended to administer Shamanland under strict military rule after the war. As he told his people, they could not afford to kill off all the Shamans, since their knowledge of metal-working and their mining skill — they really controlled all the Brown Sakae mines — could ill be spared.

Headquarters were in a big house about a hundred yards down the street, with a flat roof, whence one could overlook most of the town. And there I found Kyrlos with some of his chiefs portioning out the town for them to clear up and hold for such time as we stayed in the city. Andros was below talking to Henga, who had just arrived from mopping up the gate defences. From the grim look on his face, I could see that the latter was counting the moments till he could find Atros, who so far had not been seen, nor was there any news of his body being among the dead. Henga greeted me with a smile as I limped in.

"A good fight, Harilek! I love your Wrexham more and more. And the doctor, too, is a man after my own heart. Seldom have I seen such stout sword-play as he made in the Shaman ranks, though he uses the edge more than we do. Yes; a good fight!"

He looked as if he had passed a pleasing morning. His cap was bitten across by a long sword-gash that had dented the steel, his mail was hacked in half a dozen places, the over-collar of his under-leather jerkin had been ripped across by some sharp weapon, but his grey-blue eyes were steady as ever.

"A good fight, but comes a better," he continued. "When Wrexham has blown in the citadel door as he broke down the fort gate, then I lead the storming party — 'tis Kyrlos's own promise — and then" — his mouth set hard again — "I shall speak with Atros."

Some one brought us a jug of wine, and we washed out our dusty throats, Henga solemnly spilling a few drops on the floor to thank his gods for a good fight. We sat over our drink for a few minutes, and then Andros got to his feet.

"I see the doctor with Wrexham's sappers and their stores, Harilek. How long will they take, think you?"

"About three hours, Wrexham says. But he will want two or three changes of men, for the heat inside is stifling. If it suits you, I will take up my men with Philos. They are collected in that courtyard at the corner."

"If you will, Harilek. I was going to send some of my men, but, since you understand this new kind of war, it will perhaps be better if you go. If the rest of us are ready in two hours, will that do?"

"Quite. We shall be longer, I think."

Andros tightened up his belt and went off to give out more orders, while Henga and I joined Philos and his cousin, who with their men were seizing the opportunity for a rest and a bite of food. We had been afoot since long before dawn. I told Philos to bring them up to the gate and come ahead himself for orders, and then I led Henga along the dark pas-

sage up to the shaft, where, in a stokehold atmosphere getting hotter every moment, John with his first shift of workers was blocking up the passage. Above us in the darkness the iron door now glowed a dull sullen red.

The powder was piled under blankets, which a chain of men handing skins of water up the passage kept continuously damp. We had no safety-lamps, nothing but the flaring, crackling torches, and one little spark on the powder in that confined space would send the lot of us into eternity. Minute after minute the wall of sandbags grew, and the sweating men stumbled along the dark passage with their loads, faces and chests grimed with the torches' smoke and dripping with sweat. We had been there an hour and a half and more, when John ordered his sappers to get the fuses ready.

"Better get along now," he said to us. "Henga has to get his party in position, for another half-hour will see us ready. As for you, Harry and Alec, you're doing no good here now. There's no point in all of us going west if anything goes wrong. Besides, you've other people to think of. Be standing by half an hour from now."

With that he sent Henga, Alec, and me away. It was true that we three were of no particular use in the shaft, now that the less technical part of the work was completed, and my men were getting ready to leave. Nevertheless, as I followed them and Philos, filing down the passage, these reflections did not render any the more pleasant my last glimpse of John's sturdy figure among his grimy engineers, busy with their powder-bags and fuses in the glow of the spluttering torches, when one little spark — However, it was no good anticipating trouble; that comes of itself without any seeking.

When we emerged into the daylight once more, we found Andros superintending the troops getting into position, and Henga went off to join his company. Alec again insisted on accompanying them, and left me when he saw them falling in. Our preparations drew the attention of

the watching enemy above, and some heavy stones and a few arrows came down, doing but little harm, however.

Presently came word that no more water was required, and the last shifts of the working parties filed out into the sunlight, grimed and blinking. Another ten minutes brought the bulk of Wrexham's sappers. Then at last four more figures who clustered about the gateway, last of them John himself. Three minutes later there was a dull roar in the heart of the rock, and — visible to the watchers farther back, though not to us close under the cliff — a leap of red flame upon the cliff-top.

A long pause to let the gases escape up the shaft, and then John, with a few men with ropes and lights, went in, for the confined space in the shaft might now be filled with mine fumes, though we hoped that the strong northerly wind blowing into the passage from our end, combined with the draught created by the great fires burning above the trap-door, would clear out any gas formed by the explosion. And, luckily, so it proved, for almost immediately word came back that it was safe, and the storming party was to advance at once before the enemy could close the way again.

Henga's men poured into the passage for what Forsyth called "the last fence," and — all my cautious resolutions thrown to the winds — I followed them with Andros at the head of the supporting column. Ahead of us shouts and cries, clang of blows, dull thud of falling bodies, and crash of stones in the shaft, and then, coming to where Wrexham's sappers stood by the reopened barricade, we were aware of daylight above us. Stumbling over the fallen débris and the twisted forms among it, we clambered up the steep stairs, shivered and wrecked by the explosion, and climbing through the opening previously blocked by the great iron door — now shattered fragments of still-glowing metal scattered around — came out on the steep cliff-side.

In front of us — close-packed — raged a swaying, surging *mêlée* where Henga's men sought to drive the Shamans up the steep road to where on the hilltop in an open space

showed the low stone buildings of the chief Shaman's palace and the living-quarters of the citadel.

Ten yards ahead of me in the *mêlée* that swayed now backward, now forward, in little eddies of struggling men, was John fighting with the short-handled pickaxe he had used to clear the barricade in the passage. His face was grimed like that of a miner from his own Durham pits, but his eyes were alight with lust of battle. I saw the pickhead crash into the forehead of a Shaman knifeman ere a new eddy in the battle hid him again. On either side were Forsyth's tall figure and Henga's great shoulders.

The extra weight of Andros's column, now pouring out of the shaft mouth, settled the scales in our favour, and, step by step, fighting tooth and nail, the enemy were driven backward up the hill, check and sway and surge forward again over the limp forms underfoot. Behind us the town — lit by the westering sun — lay spread out like a map, and on the edge of the drop behind us — clear-cut against the sky — Andros with his standard-bearer signalling down that we had made good the entrance. Then he joined us again as the fight drove relentlessly forward up the steep slope, and with one final rush we surged into the chief Shaman's palace in a pack of steel. Somehow my game leg got me there, though well behind the leaders: Andros with his dancing plumes; Stephnos with his keen young face and yellow locks looking like some angel of destruction; John, Henga, and Alec, with dripping blade and blood-smeared pick, smashing their way through the now wavering foe.

The last resistance died away as we swept into the low-pillared halls and out again to the back of the palace, where in front of us — hidden by yet one more wall of rock — lay the cleft of the gate and the vultures. But no trace found we of that fiend from the nether pit — the chief Shaman — as we hunted out the fleeing foe from hole and corner, from dark-shadowed room and ghostly hall, with red torch and redder steel. Spear-point and sword and reeking pickhead checked and sank as there was no more living flesh to stay

their relentless way, and our grim-faced swordsmen halted to tie up wounds and get breath.

But while we stayed uncertain on the farther exit of the palace, Henga gave a loud cry and leaped forward as a man slipped from cover at a corner to bolt down a flight of stairs beyond into a gloomy passage. Just one word, "Atros," but that was enough for me, and game leg and all I followed the flying figures, Philos, Stephnos, Payindah, and a dozen men at my heels. We raced down the stairs past screaming women, past darkened rock-cut rooms, and came out at the end upon a little platform giving upon the gorge over the gate of death.

And there we stayed, for on the very verge of the open space above the sheer void, guarded only by a ledge a few inches high, two mail-clad figures, locked together, struggled and fought above the cavernous depths below. They reeled and fell, but as we closed Henga shrieked to us to stand back. The locked figures rose again, neither willing to loose grip, and then crashed to the ground once more; but this time Henga was on top, and his fingers writhed about the Shaman's throat.

Then, just as he had dealt with Atana, so dealt he with Atros, speaking to him slowly the while, as the man's face worked and the sweat stood out upon his brow. And there on the sheer cliff, hundreds of feet above the vultures below, Henga exacted the last farthing of his debt. Then rising to his feet, he swung up the limp body and hurled it out into the dim gulf, leaning over to watch it spinning down, arms and legs whirling through the air. Then he turned to us grimly.

"I think such carrion would poison even the vultures. Note you he was not in the fight, but lurking in the palace while better men than he went forth to death. Atana had, at least, courage."

I leaned out over the giddy drop, and saw opening before me the great cleft up which we had first come to Sakaeland. At the foot — veiled already by the gathering shadows —

was the open place of death, the circling vultures wheeling upward, disturbed by the fall of Atros's body. Kyrlos's words came back to me, "Ere the spring buds show, I will feed your master and his friends to the vultures in the gate."

6 The little twisted trees above us were still void of leaf, bare of the least little bud.

Then we made our way back into the palace now thronged with our men, seeking high and low for the Shaman chief. We passed through a honeycomb of narrow passages, and a warren of chambers hewn into the rock. The dark winding stairs and gloomy tunnels had carried us down perhaps three hundred feet, when we came to another maze of rooms — a crowd of tawdry-clothed women huddled in the corners — the archers' quarters above the gate. Through these we passed into a small pillared hall lighted with torches set in iron wall-brackets, with a single arrow-slit overlooking the gate of death.

There in his black robes, upon a carven chair supported by writhing figures in stone, sat the chief Shaman looking at us with dead eyes — his hands resting upon the carven arms of his chair — and sprawling at his feet, face down on the bloodstained floor with a knife hilt protruding from his back, the black-robed figure of his head councillor — slain, we guessed, by his master lest his knowledge might aid us.

We could get no details from our prisoners: doubtless none saw that last scene. But from the crystal phial still clutched in the dead hand one could reconstruct some of it. The sudden blow that struck down the other unsuspecting figure, the deliberate assuming of the seat in the chair of judgment, the smoothing out of the folds of the rich sombre robe, the last thought of hate as the poison was swallowed that left us with only the mask of what had been.

The cruel, narrow eyes looked out at us from the hairless, parchment-like face that was strangely devoid of wrinkles, smooth as wax under the close-fitting, black, fur-trimmed cap; the thin-lipped mouth still bore traces of the last sardonic smile at cheating us to the end. Kyrlos could feed only

a dead man to the vultures, naught but the empty shell of the lamp remained. Seated there the dead figure was imposing, but when we moved it, I realized what Aryenis had meant with her taunt about a "misshapen vulture": the scraggy neck in the fur collar, the distorted rounded back, the talon-like hands, had all something of kinship with the loathsome birds without.

And, thinking of Aryenis, I looked around the chamber with its carvings, foul but vivid representations of torture and mutilation, and I shivered involuntarily. How many shrinking prisoners, men and women alike, had prayed there in vain, not for life, but just for clean, speedy death! In a corner was a sheaf of arrows, black-shafted and white-lettered, such as we had found in the gate. The use of these we learnt from one of the guard archers whose life had been spared. When the chief Shaman considered a prisoner to be of no further use, he was made to pick an arrow from the cloth-swathed sheaf. One does not like to think of the scenes that room must have witnessed. Then, according to the lettering upon it, once outside the gate the tortured wretch might feel the prayed-for point in his heart, or know the lingering death of many hours as he lay crippled among the vultures and the obscene horrors of the place of death.

So, leaving a guard upon the chamber, we returned to the topmost palace where, in the last rays of the sun just sinking behind the hills, Kyrlos announced to the leading Shaman prisoners his intention of ruling their country, and, with the unanimous assent of his chiefs, appointed Henga as military governor, and Wrexham to take charge of all the mines and metal industries of the Shaman and Brown Sakae countries.

That night we slept in the palace, and all next day explored the Shaman citadel, cleansing its foul prisons, and giving decent burial to the pitiful remains. Many of our men clamoured for the Shamans to be flung to the vultures in the gate, but I am glad to say that Kyrlos insisted on more humane measures, slaying only such as were definitely proven guilty of murder and raid, and allowing the dead to be car-

ried away by their own folk. But none came to claim the chief Shaman's body.

Whence he came none could tell us for certain. The office was hereditary, but the advent of this man was a mystery, since his reputed father was old beyond even the long-lived Shaman elders, and his mother none knew. The chief Shaman and his successor-designate never left the citadel, and until attaining years of manhood the Shaman's heir was not brought to the council save only if his father died before he became of age. Those who knew the history of the dead fiend in the great chair were dead. Perhaps the secret — if secret there were — lay locked in the brain of that still figure sprawling on the floor before its master. Of papers and records we found none. Any that existed — and we knew the Shaman councillors had ancient records of their history and religion — must have been hidden or destroyed.

But, since that brain is dead, the chief Shaman's twisted soul, returned to the judgment-seat of Him who made it, we shall never know. All that matters is that Sakaeland is now at peace under the strong firm governance which — so long as men are men, not angels — can alone ensure that each man reap what he has sown. The Shaman hold, cleansed of its foul traces, is manned by clean-visaged Sakae bowmen, and straight-mouthed, honest-eyed Henga dispenses simple, unbiassed, soldierly justice in the open sunlight before the gate of the dark passage where John Wrexham and his sappers laboured under the glowing trapdoor.

CHAPTER XXVII

ARYENIS AND I FIND SOME THINGS THAT MATTER

THE Aornos road rolled behind our horses' feet as Aryenis and I rode to Paulos's house in the last evening sunshine of late February. A sky of cloudless blue, glint of sunlit water in the little channels under the silver-barked trees, and in Aryenis's eyes the light of sunshine clear and unalloyed, as from time to time she looked at me with a little smile of all happiness.

Behind us — a discreet ten horse-lengths away — rode Payindah, with just half a dozen of our own men, sparkle of burnished mail over new-cleaned leather, polished steel cap gay with favours of Aryenis's own colour. And as we rode through the scattered villages the people flocked about us with handfuls of winter flowers and garlands of the little yellow crocus, first harbinger of the coming spring.

For, as all Blue Sakaeland knew, this was our wedding day, and we were riding from the banquet in Kyrlos's palace at Miletis to Paulos's house, or rather to our house, since the previous day it had been formally made over to Aryenis and me, Paulos having taken up his residence at Miletis.

"Since you are leaving Kyrlos, child," he had said to Aryenis, "it is only right that I should come and live with him, and take up life again as it was when we were both young men and found each other all-sufficient. Life ends mostly as it begins."

My recollections of the previous few days were blurred and hazy. There were ceremonies unceasing; signings and sealings of crabbed parchments; dinners long and tedious, where endless people monopolized Aryenis to my complete exclusion; hours of business with Paulos and his steward, learning all the details of his lands. Also ceaseless interviews with tailors, these last brightened by Aryenis's presence,

since, in accordance with Sakae custom, my wedding outfit was her gift. Outfit is about the only word, for the Sakae bride-to-be seems to consider it her business to clothe her man for a lifetime, judging by the number and variety of garments that appeared necessary.

Altogether it had been rather a tedious week, and there were times when I envied Alec, who could contrive to get off with Ziné whenever he could spirit her away from Aryenis, since they were not to be married till the spring.

Then yesterday I saw my lady but for a few short moments, and that surrounded by Ziné and half a dozen more girls for a last inspection of her wedding dress.

This morning I had filled the usual puppet part that is allotted to the bridegroom in countries like Sakaeland, where women rather more than hold their own. Alec and Andros — who had insisted on being one of my supporters — took charge of me, dressed me, all but shaved and washed me, never let me out of their sight for an instant, while Andros filled every otherwise unoccupied moment in coaching me as to the part I had to play.

Finally, they had almost lifted me into the saddle when with John, Philos, and a score more friends, and a hundred of my Astara men behind us, we rode down the broad garlanded streets to the dark little church opposite to Kyrlos's palace, and I was marched up to the cushions in front of the rich altar-veils that concealed the sanctuary. The air was heavy with incense, and the little high windows threw but a faint light into the half-gloom, where the tapers burned before the heavily framed old pictures, and the richly decorated little shrines, where, half-seen, were metal-framed representations of gospel scenes and of saints, like Russian ikons.

The church was thronged with folk in bravery of silk and brocade, heavily embroidered tunics and fur-tipped cloaks, lightened by the rich sheen of satin, the cold glitter of silver and warm sparkle of gold from hair ornament and bangle, from belt-buckle and sword-hilt.

When I had been shepherded through the frankly staring crowd to stand in my place, supported by Andros and Alec on either side, my sole consolation was that presently Aryenis would be kneeling beside me on the richly worked cushion a yard away on the tessellated floor. I sought refuge from the hum and buzz of whispered conversation behind me in concentrating on that cushion with its curious gold thread-work, until I think I knew the pattern by heart.

Presently — ages it seemed to be — there was the clatter of hoofs outside, sound of trumpets, and thereafter I felt less self-conscious, for I knew that all the crowd behind me would have eyes but for two things — the men for Aryenis, and the women for her clothes. Andros and Alec closed in upon me. Then footsteps behind, the rustle of talk died away for an instant, and from the corner of my eye I caught the first glimpse of my lady in flowing drapery of silk, filmy veil of flower-wreathed white over the thick coils of her red-gold hair, glint of gold from ring and bracelet, as on Kyrlos's arm she took her place by the cushion on my left, long-lashed hazel eyes fixed resolutely on the sanctuary curtains in front, lips of warm coral against the unwonted pallor of her face.

Followed the old, old ceremonies, the music of Greek of the earliest centuries, the readings, the prayers, the promises. Then Aryenis and I alone before the white-locked priest with the ascetic face, who seemed to have stepped straight out of some old stained-glass window, as I slipped the flat heavy gold bangle over her elbow to show that we were one for so long as life should last, and kissed her two hands in Sakae fashion in token of all loyalty. Thereafter she kissed me once upon the forehead, and we turned to walk down the aisle under an arch of blades.

Then the slow ride back to the palace, the banquet, the toasts, the greetings, until well on in the afternoon we rode out of the south gate — thronged with all our friends, and, it seemed to me, with half the city as well to see us go — and took the Aornos road.

"Content, sweetheart?" said I, as the last glimpse of Miletis vanished in the trees.

"All content, fairy prince," said she slowly. "And you? Have you found the things that really matter?"

"All of them, Shahzadi, since I've found you, and with you go all the rest."

"And you are quite sure what they are?" asked my lady, with questioning eyes.

"Quite sure. Your companionship, your friendship, you when I'm tired or lonely, you at the end of every day, you and I just absolutely one person, and all the real intimacy and happiness that go with that, the only foundation for wedded life."

"In fact, just you and me, to put it shortly," said Aryenis laughing happily.

"Yes, Shahzadi, just that. And you will show me that you want that — and me?"

"Must I show you?"

"Always. It isn't only women that want to be told and shown the things they know. Men also sometimes. You see a man may come — probably will come — to disbelieve the things he knows, or thought he knew, unless he's shown them clearly and repeatedly."

"And then, O Harilek?"

"And then, Shahzadi, good-bye to happiness. Will you say good-bye to it?"

"Never!" said Aryenis, decisively. "I shall always show you the things you know. I shall just keep your eyes and ears, your mind and your every sense, so full of them that you'll never have an instant to think of anything or any one except them and me. That please you, man of mine?"

"Yes, lady mine. That sketches heaven as in your song, 'Just a man and a woman, all in all.' One can't want more than that."

Then we rode in silence a space up the lane to Paulos's house, where Aryenis had first talked of the things that matter, and of that greatest of gifts that man or woman might

give if they had the right marks. The sun sank behind the western hills, leaving the eastern wall that ringed round Sakaeland one vivid glow of crimson snow above the long purple and lilac shadows under the cloudless sky.

I helped Aryenis from her mare, and we went up the grey stone steps to the open door with the firelight gleaming in the hall. She checked on the threshold, and I remembered just in time that it is ill fortune for a bride to cross the doorway of her home for the first time on foot. I picked her up in my arms and carried her into the hall, and as I put her down our lips met in the first kiss in our own home, in the firelit hall with the carved timbers, the half-seen trophies, the gleaming wood of floor and chair and settle.

After dinner we sat on the couch by the fire in silent content at being one at last — just realizing to the full the bliss of being together, of really belonging each to each. Just such another evening of flickering firelight playing across Aryenis's hair and face, across the white slimness of neck and arm, as recalled those evenings of the past — the dragon evenings at Aornos, the ribbon evening in this same hall of ours.

"I want you to say really nice things to me to-night, please, Harilek."

"What shall I say, sweetheart? Tell you that your frock is pretty, or that you are looking your very nicest?"

"No; not things like that."

I looked down into Aryenis's eyes, upturned in the half-light, gleam of white below the luminous wide circle of the iris, and on the soft curves of her parted lips.

"Tell you that I love you, then?"

I felt her arm draw tighter round me.

"Tell you that I love you with every little bit of me? 'cause that's true, you know. I just worship you, sweetheart."

Aryenis's arms were very tight as she strained against me, drawing my lips down to hers, pausing to whisper ere they met:

"And, man of mine, I love you — always — with everything that's in me."

And in that long dear kiss I could feel the rhythm of her measured words, and all the depth of feeling that prompted them — words that moved me more than any I have ever heard in all my life; and in the silences that followed as we sat in the firelight glow I could almost hear the echo of her words ringing down the long avenue of years in front, like the music of the stars above — unchanging, undying rhythm down the trackless vaults of time.

At last Aryenis stood up, smoothing the ruffled coils of the burnished copper of her hair, slim arms outlined against the dark wood panelling. I was going to get up, too, when she bent over and kissed me, whispering as she pushed me back on to my seat:

“I want you to look for pictures in the fire just a little while, Harilek. All the things you’ve seen since you came to Sakaeland, and then come and tell me what you’ve found.”

And with another kiss she was gone.

So for a while I sat still in front of the glowing logs, and picture after picture came up into my mind: Aryenis of that morning, Aryenis of the mauve ribbons, Aryenis of the desert days, and through and with them all Aryenis of the sunlit Aornos road — the dearest best companion that ever man could have — until finally I went up the dark wood stairs to the big dressing-room next to our bedroom, where the lamplight glittered on my mail and weapons and on the carved presses round the walls.

Still with my fireside pictures fresh in my mind, I blew out the little silver lamp and passed into our room — with the dancing firelight playing on the warm hangings, and throwing long shadows on the rug-strewn floor.

And then — all my pictures faded and merged into one, now crystallized from vision into warm living reality.

“How very, very beautiful you are, Shahzadi!” I whispered, awe-struck.

“I want you to say that to me every day of my life — husband,” said Aryenis.

THE END

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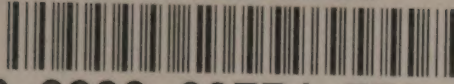
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